

THESIS

"WE JUST NEEDED A PLACE WE COULD WRITE": COMPOSING TRANSITIONS
IN A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT WRITING GROUP

Submitted By
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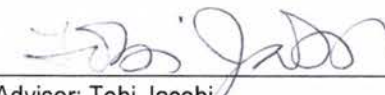
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY KATHRYN HAMMOND ENTITLED "WE JUST NEEDED A PLACE WE COULD WRITE": COMPOSING TRANSITIONS IN A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT WRITING GROUP BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

"WE JUST NEEDED A PLACE WE COULD WRITE": COMPOSING TRANSITIONS IN A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT WRITING GROUP

A writing group could be beneficial for first-year college students because during that period of life, termed "late adolescence" (see Erikson; McAdams), many elements of identity are being negotiated. In connection with the changes related to college, many decisions are being made that will affect identity formation. Also, there is potential for an extracurricular writing group for this age group because the focused genre of writing during this first year is typically scholarly, not personal or reflective. Three main questions are guiding my research on this topic:

- 1) What are first year students' perceptions of the outcomes of an extracurricular writing group?
- 2) Does writing through the transition to college raise awareness to identity formation?
- 3) How does experience-sharing in a writing group impact a students' transition to college?

In order to address these questions, I am reviewing relevant literature to draw connections between identity formation, writing groups, and personal writing; I am facilitating a writing group for first-year students at CSU; and I am conducting post-writing group interviews so the participants can evaluate whether personal writing in a social context influenced them during their first year.

The purpose of my thesis is tripartite. First, it will revisit expressive writing as valuable to the academic community. Secondly, it will argue for a place for a first-year writing group as a setting for personal writing beyond the classroom. Finally, this thesis synthesizes the potential

positive outcomes of this college group through a survey of writing research, reflection on the facilitated writing group, and students' reported perceptions of the writing group.

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Table Of Contents

<u>Introduction</u> : From Recognition to Invention	1
<u>Chapter 1</u> : Envisioning Alternatives: The Academic/Personal Binary And Students' Writing	9
<u>Chapter 2</u> : Background and Methodology	32
<u>Chapter 3</u> : Writing The Self: "Seeing What You Write Kinda Shows You What Or How You Are"	56
<u>Chapter 4</u> : Writing Socially: "Let's Share...Let's Talk About Our Own Writing"	85
<u>Chapter 5</u> : Personal Reflections and Future Directions	110

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Introduction

From Recognition to Invention

When I first came to Colorado State University in August of 2008, I participated in a week of training as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for the English Department. During that week, the Director of Composition, Dr. Sarah Sloane, told all of us not to be nervous about teaching, because chances were the first-year students that would make up most of our classes were far more nervous than we were. While I'm sure the only purpose Dr. Sloane had in mind for this comment was to comfort all of us big-eyed, anxious GTAs, it also resonated in me as a reminder to embody empathy – these students were facing more changes than we were.

Perhaps because I only taught one section of College Composition my first semester, or perhaps because, as an overly ambitious 21-year-old, I was teaching students only two or three years younger than me, I found it easy to relate to and connect with my students. I connected to their experiences as undergraduates and let reflections on my own experiences as a student influence my lesson planning, curriculum, and teaching style. My classes typically involved a lot of motion and collaborative activities, as I have never been a fan of lecture classes. I offered my students many opportunities to bring their personalities into the classroom and encouraged classmate interaction. I did this because all of my most memorable classes have been the ones with a strong classroom community. In some ways, my pedagogical approach was the result of conscious reflection and planning, and in some ways, the classroom community was formed simply because I enjoyed my students' individuality and contributions.

One of the things I enjoyed the most, as did my students, was the "question of the day" I would ask at the beginning of each class in order to check attendance. These questions were typically open for the students to respond to with their own experiences and were just for fun. Some of the questions included silly things like "If the nation declared a holiday in your honor, how would you want everyone to celebrate?" or "If you could have any superpower, what would it be?" Some questions were a bit more reflective, such as "What is one accomplishment you are very proud of?" or "Who do you look up to, and why?" This was one of the opportunities students had to bring their personal experiences into the classroom. Because our classroom environment was very friendly and encouraging, my students were not shy about answering these daily questions sincerely in front of their classmates.

I remember very clearly the day I asked "What is one of your worst fears?" to begin the class. I had anticipated responses like my own (sharks). Instead, the students voiced fears about experiences in college, such as not traveling enough, partying enough, meeting enough people, joining enough groups, or finding the career they wanted. The most common response was along the lines of, "That I will look back on my life, realize I just worked at some job for a few decades, and regret that I didn't do all the things I hoped I would while I was young." As I checked off their names for attendance and listened to the answers, I couldn't help but point out the similarities in their fears. I asked them, "Why do you think you have to do all of these things *now*?" The students explained their perceptions of this time in their life as "those crazy college years" where experimentation was accepted and opportunities were endless. They wanted to skydive, they wanted to study abroad, they wanted to build up a killer resume so they got their dream job when they graduated, they wanted to create life-long friendships, and they wanted to party. And they wanted to do it all now, because after college they might get married, settle down, have kids, work a 9–5 job, and never do those things. I was surprised by the students' perceptions that their free

lives ended when they graduated from college. I reassured them that there were many adventures awaiting them after college, and that they could skydive or travel for the next 50 years if they wanted to make time for it. And, I admit, I got all impassioned and philosophical (and clichéd) about enjoying each year as it came, and “seizing the moment.” But when I thought about it later and was honest with myself, I remember feeling the same way when I entered college. And in some ways, I think we all fear those regrets resulting from lost opportunities. That was one of the days that I looked at the 19 faces before me in the classroom and saw each of them as a mixture of fears, apprehensions, and hopes for their college careers. It surprised me how easy it was as an instructor to simplify or generalize their first-year experiences.

The realization I had that day was reinforced when I read my students' evaluations of the course a month or so after the fall semester ended. There seemed to be two very distinct categories of comments the students had written: course writing and classroom environment. A few who commented on the writing expressed some frustration with writing research-based papers or writing about the same class topic for the whole semester. Some suggested including more creative writing or varied and personal topics. Those who commented on the classroom community said things like, “This was my only class where my teacher *and* my classmates knew my name,” or “I loved the question of the day.” One that stood out to me especially was where one student wrote simply, “I’m going to miss this class. We were like a family.” I sat at my kitchen table looking at all of the evaluation comments, and was again struck by my students' complex reactions to beginning college – both academically and socially. I realized how static our writing practices were in comparison to the dynamics of our classroom interaction and their out-of-class experiences. I realized that the community environment that was so important to me was just as important to them, if not more so. I paused and thought about each of my students' side comments throughout the semester about having to live with roommates in dorms, about meeting tons of people or not

meeting enough people, about trying to select a program to major in, about driving home to see their families on weekends rather than staying on campus, about working, or about being involved in campus activities. Their comments depicted individuals who were facing dramatic change: they were living with strangers, dealing with increased responsibility (academic, financial, time management), trying to select a career, adjusting to a new town, feeling unnoticed in their large required courses, and missing home while enjoying the freedom of college. I realized then the importance of these students interacting regularly with their classmates and instructor, and having a place where they could feel individually recognized and understood.

It wasn't until about halfway through my program that I realized not everyone shared my recognition of students' transitions or need for classroom community. Conversations I had with other instructors and the scholarly articles I was reading in composition studies revealed different attitudes toward first-year students. Some of the instructors I spoke with showed a great deal of empathy and connection, but toward their *colleagues* through their talk *about* their students. Most of the publications and research I read generalized first-year students into an unidentifiable mass that was only broken down into categories based on their academic preparedness. Scholars have called attention to this tendency as well, and have argued that there are consequences to categorizing or generalizing students. Patricia Sullivan's article "Composing Culture: A Place for the Personal" illustrates this when she writes, "There is a common thread, then, that runs through our composition courses across differences in our curricular philosophy, and it serves to maintain the personal/academic binary: Students are defined by their lack" (45). Students coming to college composition courses are typically viewed as writers unfamiliar with the language of the university (Ivanic; G. Allen; Bartholomae "Inventing"; Ritchie). In this way, students' prior knowledge of writing is not valued in its own right so much as viewed as needing to be replaced or, at best, expanded to

meet college writing expectations. Sullivan states,

We regard students merely as learners, not as knowers who stand to persuade or educate us. The lived experiences and kinds of knowledge students already have and essay in their writing is not real knowledge. Real knowledge, legitimate knowledge—the kind of knowledge worth knowing—is what students come to college and to classes like first-year composition for. (45)

This perception of students can be problematic as the sole focus on academic proficiency leaves them feeling detached from college writing or like outsiders to the discourse (Ivanic; Williams; G. Allen). Roz Ivanic, in *Writing and Identity*, says, “[T]he one thing that characterizes most of the writers I worked with was a sense of inferiority, a lack of confidence in themselves, a sense of powerlessness, a view of themselves as people without knowledge, and hence without authority” (88). Joy Ritchie writes in “Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity” that she is often struck by students’ “frustration and confusion as they try to negotiate a voice of their own while they attempt to satisfy the requirements of the institution” (152).

The focus on students’ academic preparedness is an issue that needs to be revisited. Anne Ruggles Gere argues that composition studies would benefit from reconsidering this characterization of students as “amateurs” and says, “We can also learn to value the amateur” (“Kitchen Tables” 88). Similarly, Ritchie writes, “We must resist reductive descriptions of our students’ development as writers. Each student comes to our class with a unique history, with different assumptions about writing, and different needs” (171). By inviting students to engage in personal writing and providing space for it at the university, I believe we can complicate and enrich our views of first year students so they are not “defined by their lack.” While it is clear in our scholarship and in my colleagues’ conversations that we all care a great deal for our students’ success, it seems to me that “success” is limited to improving writing skills or helping the students

“get it” (the “it” being academic discourse). As a result, the students’ identities and concerns slip through the cracks of our conversations.

It is probably not surprising, then, that during my studies in composition I grew interested in expressivist theory and out-of-school literacy settings (particularly writing groups). Each of these emphasizes collaboration, creating a sense of community, and providing opportunities to explore personal experiences through writing. Additionally, I took a communication studies course entitled Theories of Interpersonal Communication which introduced to me a plethora of theoretical considerations of identity or the “self” as developed through interaction and relationships. These areas of scholarship organized my experiences with my first-year students into a research interest and influenced my approach to this thesis.

What brought me from my realizations during my first semester teaching to this thesis was the intersection of all of these elements. My first-year students showed a desire for community and appreciated the opportunity to share experiences during their transition to college. My coursework introduced me to theories about personal writing as a means to compose experiences and explore identity. I became interested in the collaborative and supportive communities of writing groups. Therefore, I saw writing groups as a space beyond the classroom where first-year students could write creatively or personally, could share experiences, build the community they valued in their small classes, and discuss writing.

Throughout the two years of my program, I have been involved with writing groups to varying degrees. My interest began first semester with Caroline E. Heller’s book *Until we are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin*, which detailed a women’s writing group in the slums of San Francisco. From there, I observed a women’s writing group at a local correctional facility, run by Dr. Tobi Jacobi and the CSU Community Literacy Center. Because of my growing interest, Dr. Jacobi put me into contact with a woman who was in the process of forming another

women's writing group at a different correctional facility. I met with her a few times over a semester to learn more about the process of starting a writing group. We talked over coffee about all of the decisions that needed to be made in order to define, create, and facilitate a writing group. This prepared me to take off on my own, and I created and facilitated two separate writing groups for first-year students on CSU's campus, one in the spring and one in the fall of 2009.

While my involvement with writing groups only began during my graduate program, my interest in personal writing has a much longer and more intimate history. It is no mystery why writing groups appealed to me so much when I, myself, was a closet-creative writer. When I read about writing groups, I was intrigued by the idea of multiple people with various interests and writing skills getting together to expose the kind of writing I had always protected and hid. Personal writing seemed just that, so intimately personal and honest that the idea of sharing it with a group was both frightening and exhilarating. In my own experience, personal writing had stayed hidden, but naturally I hoped the pieces had some value, showed some talent, and would eventually mean something to someone besides me. However, the fear that my writing may not be all that great or especially insightful outside of my head kept me stacking black-and-white speckled composition notebooks in my nightstand, safe (if not stifled) in the dark.

I had encountered countless people, including many of my own students, who admitted at one point or another that they had kept a journal, tried writing song lyrics, or occasionally dabbled with poetry and/or short stories. And yet, those admissions were always accompanied by a dismissive shrug or embarrassed smile. A lack of confidence was woven into their tone or posture, and even I did those things whenever I responded that I, too, occasionally wrote. Usually I would throw in, "But just for fun," or some other trivializing phrase, to avoid actually showing anything I had written. I knew I was not the only person writing "for fun" but I was also aware that I was not the only one who was insecure. Hiding personal writing seemed as natural as writing it.

My research on writing groups showed me a way to fight that tendency to hide personal writing, and revealed the benefits of doing so. I considered how writing groups could address the conflicts that seem to plague embarrassed writers (or insecure, new college writers) – the desire to have reflections acknowledged and appreciated as well as a desire to have responses to that writing. From my first-year students' comments, my own struggles with personal writing, and my continued research, I became interested in providing a space at the university where personal writing could move from an isolated, muted setting to a social, dynamic setting and complement academic writing. In this space, personal writing could be valued, experiences could be validated, transitions could be reflected on, writing could be shared, and community could be built. This is why I began facilitating writing groups for first-year college students in 2009 and now seek to understand what meaning these groups have for the participants. This thesis reflects on writing groups for first-year students and suggests that these groups can benefit students in their transition to college as both individuals and writers.

Chapter 1

Envisioning Alternatives: The Academic/Personal Binary And Students'

Writing

"More than half of the students I spoke with wrote at home, although few were willing to admit this practice to their peers, even to their closest friends. Most of them had difficult challenges in their lives and some used writing to make sense of all that was going on around them. Students who were struggling to pass English in school and refused to write a sentence during a class period kept diaries, wrote poems, and composed plays once they left the school grounds." – *Katherine*

Schultz, "Reconceptualizing Literacy Learning in and out of School"

"I propose that we listen to the signals that come through the walls of our classrooms from the world outside." – *Anne Ruggles Gere, "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of*

Composition"

Conflicts Surrounding The Personal

As I mentioned in the introduction, extracurricular writing groups could allow first-year students to engage in a breadth of personal writing that the composition classroom does not typically allow. While personal writing is an integral part of composition studies, it has conflicted with academic writing in both research and pedagogy. To illustrate the imbalance that is conveyed to our students, especially in their first year of college, I want to review the split between "academic" and "personal" for scholars, teachers, and students. This review of scholarship makes

visible the significance and necessity of personal writing as well as the struggle to unite it with academic writing.

First of all, it is apparent in our scholarly publications that *both* personal and academic writing are important to the field. Scholars have recently written about the complexity and significance of each in composition studies. Beth Daniell's article "Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture" (1999) explores personal narratives in composition in order to remind us of the importance of this typically overlooked genre. Then there is the symposium collective printed in *College English* entitled "The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives against the Grain" (2001) in which scholars such as Deborah Brandt, Ellen Cushman, and Victor Villanueva express their struggles with personal voice in academic publishing. Anne Ruggles Gere added to the recent discussion on personal writing with a focus on the notion of silence in her piece "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing" (2001). Peter Elbow has also revisited this discussion in his 2007 article "Reconsiderations: Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries." Additionally, the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication proclaimed the theme "Remix: Revisit, Rethink, Revise, Renew." At this conference, over 100 presenters brought the very issue of the personal back to the forefront of our field ("Conference on..."). It is evident that as scholars, we recognize the importance of making space for personal writing, and that *both* personal and academic writing are important to our field. However, beyond the occasional in-class activity, we do not convey the significance of personal writing to our first-year students or provide a space for them to fully explore it.

While personal writing has consistently been part of the field's discussions, in the classroom it has typically been categorized as an "other" to the more prominent academic writing concerns such as critical analysis, research skills, or argument strategies (Williams; Park; G.

Allen). The result of the academic/personal binary in composition studies is that pedagogical approaches and researchers have been forced to take a side.

The history of composition studies has not ignored advocates of personal writing, as there have been a variety of efforts to bring it into the university. In the 1960s, expressivism brought personal writing into pedagogical focus by emphasizing personal voice, recognizing students' knowledge to destabilize the teacher hierarchy, writing as a process, and writing about personal experiences (Burnham). While the pillars of expressivism represent important writing values, the criticisms of its use as a dominant pedagogical approach are numerous and well-founded. These criticisms note that the classroom is inherently hierarchical, that having students write about personal experiences to be *graded* is undoubtedly a sticky ethical situation, that instructors can become numb to the personal meaning incorporated into personal writing when the topics become redundant, and that mastering expressivist writing may not be easily transferrable to mastering academic discourse for other courses (Bartholomae "Writing"; Burnham; Sullivan; Newkirk; Berlin; Williams). As a result, expressivism faded out of the pedagogical spotlight.

Our attention to personal writing did not completely end with the shift away from expressivism, however. The social turn, or "post-process" shift, has broadened composition studies' perception of writing to include considerations of the writer's culture and social context (Matsuda; Trimbur; Clark). The social turn influenced composition studies as elements of expressivism came back, but reinvented. Rather than having students write entirely about personal experiences, efforts were made to bridge academic discourse and student experiences. In the article "The Uses and Limitations of Personal or Personalized Writing in Writing Theory, Research, and Instruction," Sandra Stostky, from Harvard's School of Education, refers to remnants of process or expressivist pedagogy in our curricula as "personalized writing." Because personal connection to academic learning, or personalized writing, is still significant, various activities and

in-class writing tasks appear in current publications to help connect writers to class assignments (Given et al.; Lassonde; Elder).

Therefore, it seems personal writing appeared at the university in varied ways. Expressivism embraced personal writing so students could explore their own experiences, find their writing voice, and connect to their writing practices. This meant the writing truly was expressive, or what James Britton calls, "close to the self" (96). The complication of expressivist pedagogy was that it was just that – a pedagogical approach. All the tension and conflicts were a result of this form of writing taking place in a naturally hierarchical classroom. After expressivism faded, personal writing came back to the classroom but in a reinvented and subservient way. It was designed to access prior knowledge related to a class assignment rather than designed for students to explore their own identities or reflect on their own vast experiences. Personal writing offers a greater breadth and depth than its current use reflects, as students are restricted to only exploring experiences relevant to the class topic. There is room in composition studies for revisiting personal writing in a more holistic way, but this should take place outside of the classroom in order to remedy the critiques of expressivism and the limitations of the current use of personal writing. This literature review visits the different areas of scholarship involving personal writing groups for first-year students, and illustrates areas composition studies can make room for these groups.

Personal Writing For Students

Composition scholars have grappled with personal writing in pedagogy as well as in research publication, but students' personal writing beyond the classroom is an overlooked issue. Although personal writing is recognized as significant in our field, it is not extended to our incoming students simultaneously with academic practices. By engaging in both academic and personal writing during the first year of college, students can experience a spectrum of university-sponsored literacy practices. My aim in reviewing scholarship within and beyond composition studies is to

understand the significance of this increased range of literacy opportunities focused on self-awareness and identity formation during the first year of college.

The scholarship on personal writing shows that writing about the self can invite the writer's personal investment in the craft, it is an enjoyable process for the writer to compose his or her own experiences, it allows the writer's unique experiences and individuality to be composed and recognized, it can convey writing strategies we teach, and it can help the writer become more aware of and negotiate his or her identity. I will overview each of these benefits and situate them in supporting literature to illustrate the significance of personal writing and why it should be extended to first-year students.

Personal Investment

Because personal writing is close to the self, it invites the writer to a level of investment and motivation that more formal writing may not (Spires et al.). As early as 1968, James Moffett's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* argues that having students write about the "raw material" of their experiences cultivates a level of investment in writing practices that academic writing may not. "It is amazing how much so-called writing problems clear up when the student really cares, when he is realistically put into the drama of somebody with something to say to somebody else," Moffett states (12). Thirty-four years later, Gregory Light collected data on students' perspectives on personal writing for his article "From the Personal to the Public: Conceptions of Creative Writing in Higher Education." Consistently, the interviewed individuals noted that personal writing was characterized by its connection to the writer's experiences and feelings as well as its freedom from the conventions of academic writing. In "Leveling the Academic Playing Field through Autobiographical Reading and Writing," Hiller Spires et al. argue that writing about personal experiences invites students to become "emotionally and psychologically engaged with their work" which brings more "significance" to their stories (297). These scholars suggest that as a result of

this personal connection to the craft, writers are more motivated to engage in the act of writing. Additionally, this connection is the reason writers derive pleasure from writing about their own experiences.

Enjoyment

Jeff Park's *Writing at the Edge* discusses writing group participants and the enthusiasm and motivation the participants display towards personal writing. He writes, "At the Writers' Group, the act of writing becomes an act of pure joy" and he connects this attitude with psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's study of "flow and creative processing." Park writes, "[F]low [according to Csikszentmihalyi] is the 'state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it'" (19). Moffett shows how relating personal experience through writing results in greater investment in the writing process, and Park shows how this investment results in joy. Thomas Newkirk has also commented on these outcomes of personal writing from his experiences using it in his classes, saying, "The overwhelming and consistent comments we see [from students] are those of appreciation for the opportunity to write and reflect on life experiences" (19). Newkirk argues that personal writing at the college level may be appreciated by students because it affirms the writer – a feeling not received when writing about issues further from the self. "The great strain of college writing is to appear much older and wiser, to assume a wisdom and judiciousness that seems wildly beyond the reach of an eighteen-year-old," Newkirk writes. "And maybe some of the pleasure students take [from personal writing] is in being allowed to 'act their age'" (82).

Meaning-Making

In addition to motivation and pleasure, personal writing allows for recognition of the writer. By exploring experiences on the page, writers go through a process of meaning-making (Newkirk; Pennebaker; Stostky; Spires et al.). They ascribe significance to an experience by writing about it

and then putting it in conversation with others, which creates meaning beyond the writer (McCartney; Pennebaker). Spires et al. write that by crafting personal experiences into purposeful writing, "students feel validated and come to believe that their stories and experiences are valuable and meaningful" (297). It is important for students' personal narratives to be recognized and ascribed meaning as this influences their perception of writing. Patricia Sullivan acknowledges, with Giroux's words in mind, that we need the space for this to occur: "Giroux suggests that we 'provide the conditions for students to speak so that their narratives can be affirmed and engaged along with the consistencies and contradictions that characterize such experiences'" (qtd. in Sullivan 54). Similarly, Ritchie writes that more recognition needs to be ascribed to individual backgrounds, as each college student arrives with "a unique history, with different assumptions about writing, and different needs" (171). Perhaps it is time to take these suggestions beyond the classroom and provide *new* conditions for students to voice their narratives in order for them to be affirmed and seen as meaningful. Undergraduates can benefit from this opportunity as both writers and students, and composition studies may benefit by considering the significance of their personal experiences and recognizing them as students, writers, *and* persons. Typically, our vision is focused on undergraduate's roles as students and writers, and their other roles are peripheral. By allowing them to write about their "consistencies and contradictions" through extracurricular personal writing, our own views of first-year students can be enriched.

Improving Writing Strategies

In addition to these benefits, research shows that engaging in extensive and varied forms of writing (not solely academic) has educational benefits. If we limit our view of educational literacy practices to academic writing in the classroom, we could miss the importance of personal writing and extracurricular literacy activities. Britton et al. argue that more formal, academic writing is only one of three functions writing embodies. They call academic writing "transactional" and say that it is

acquired by writers *after* they have acquired the expressive function of writing. Therefore, they argue that the expressive function needs to be emphasized in order for the transactional function to be learned (Britton et al.). Our field could make room for both transactional and expressive writing functions by complementing academic instruction with personal writing groups. First-year students can be trained in the transactional in their composition classrooms while they simultaneously utilize the expressive function in extracurricular writing groups. The use of multiple writing practices provides a richer, smoother learning process for these writers.

Guy Allen extensively studied the relationship between personal writing and academic writing in his own teaching practices. In his 2000 article entitled "Language, Power, and Consciousness: A Writing Experiment at the University of Toronto," he discusses his experimentation with a basic writing course. He originally assigned solely expository essays and found little to no improvement in his students' writing skills. Because of his desire to improve the course, Allen was driven to study this phenomenon. His numerous studies show that "direct attention to the expository essay does not improve students' performance on the expository essay" (257). Allen began to incorporate personal essays into the course. The results of Allen's experimentation align with aforementioned studies by Britton et al. from the 1960s on expressive and transactional writing functions. "My experiments show that these students master the English usage demanded by the academy far more quickly and effectively when they are encouraged in various writing assignments to mix their home languages with the academy's 'standard English,'" Allen writes (257). As a result of mixing these writing functions, he noted that the students' writing improved in "technical quality, honesty, vividness, and originality" (255). He acknowledged that this was growth he did not see with the sole focus on expository essays. These scholars suggest that mixing writing practices and introducing personal writing may positively influence students on an educational level.

Reflecting On Identity

Personal writing is distinct from academic writing because of the intimacy between the writer and the written product (Williams; Elbow; Britton; Newkirk; Park; Light). The content is the writer's personal experiences, observations, and the meaning the writer ascribes to them. As a result, a writer connects and constructs his or her identity through personal writing. Don Murray writes in *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*,

The fear of exposure [in personal] writing is a rational fear. But in the act of exposure, writers discover themselves. I meet myself on the page and after decades of writing have come to accept myself—I'd better—and in the process of writing I have learned who I am—and have found a person with whom I can live and work, a person I keep needing to rediscover. (3)

Newkirk also writes about the intimate connection between the self and personal writing. "[T]he writer needs to present a malleable self, one that can be affected 'significantly' by experience," he writes (22). As a result, the writer focuses on the changes the self is going through and depicts the significance of those changes in writing. "The 'self' is always at risk, in play, engaged in the process of growth and change. It can turn, even gyrate. To give it a name, this view is 'developmental'; the writer is engaged in a staged process of self-actualization," Newkirk writes (22).

Sullivan also says that personal writing displays the self in ways academic writing does not. She argues that composition studies would benefit from allowing our students to make their diverse literacy practices and experiences more apparent through personal writing at the university. "[P]ersonal narratives are told within certain cultural frames of intelligibility," she writes. "I think that if we make these frames visible, we can gain an understanding of how social and cultural relations work to then construct what we take to be our 'selves' – individuals with particular desires and

identities" (46). Sullivan suggests that writing about the self not only depicts a writer's culture, but it also brings the writer to *understand* that culture in relationship to her identity. She argues that the reflection on the self is especially beneficial for young college students. To illustrate this, she reflects on a typical topic students write about: saying goodbye to parents on the first-day of college. Sullivan writes,

[T]he conclusion, "At last, I'm a college student," still bears the traces of that departure in the ensuing silence, the textual space that signals that the writer has nothing more to say. For the fundamental and profound question these narratives are really asking is, "Who am I...now?" (47)

This is a key reason why balancing academic writing with personal writing during the first year of college is so pivotal. What Sullivan recognizes here is the evaluation and redefining of identity that first-year students are facing. While we may be vaguely aware of the changes our students are encountering, we could benefit from a greater understanding of this identity transformation and how it influences our students' writing attitudes. Although personal writing is understood as a means to explore and understand the self, its value is not always conveyed to students. According to scholars such as Sullivan, Newkirk, and Allen, reconsidering students as more than just writers but as individuals facing significant change could inform our instructional approaches and benefit the field.

According to the scholarship above, personal writing is significant because writers are motivated to write about their own experiences. They enjoy the process of writing when they feel a personal connection to their content. Also, by sharing their unique backgrounds and experiences, writers receive recognition and affirmation. Additionally, personal writing may help students acquire the academic discourse, teach them to enrich their writing with meaningful content, and sharpen their rhetorical skills. Another aspect of personal writing that is unique from most academic writing

is the self-reflective component. Writers reflect upon themselves and become more aware of their identities. Thus there are many benefits to the intersection of personal writing, first-year students' transitions, and identity formation.

Intersections: College, Identity, And Personal Writing

While the composition scholars noted above have acknowledged this as a significant transition, the field could be informed by the great deal of scholarship on the development of self in fields such as psychology and communication studies. Specifically, philosopher George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism and his focus on the "self" can inform composition studies on the complex process of identity formation. His exploration of this subject from 1900-1929, as well as the works his students published in his name posthumously, provide a framework to understand our approach to personal writing and identity.

According to Mead (who uses the male pronoun as his default), the "self" is formed through a process that includes the individual becoming an object to himself, the individual generalizing the greater community's attitudes and values, and the individual contextualizing himself as a part of that community. This process is both reflective and social. In order for one to become self-conscious, Mead explains, he must perceive himself through the viewpoints of others. "The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs," Mead says ("Self" 202). It is through role-taking and the individual seeing himself as an object that he is able to recognize his behaviors and attitudes and see whether or not they align with his community. The community or social group from which the individual derives a sense of self holds certain attitudes, which Mead calls "the generalized other" ("Self" 218). An individual then perceives the attitudes of the community, sees himself from the viewpoints of others in that community, and then goes through a

process of adjusting his "old" self with the attitudes of the community. Mead's concepts of role-taking to understand the self, the process of identity formation being dependent on social interaction, and the disintegration of an old self in light of changing attitudes or values can help us comprehend other scholarship on identity, such as Dan McAdams' and Erik Erikson's work.

Research in psychology shows the significance of exploring experience, especially during college. Numerous studies have been done on the transitions and identity formation that occurs during the first year of college as this has been recognized as a significant period of conflict and self-definition (Luyckx et al.; McLean; Bartle-Haring, Brucker, and Hock; Zarrett and Eccles; Lumley and Provenzano; McAdams et al.). Dan P. McAdams, a psychologist at Northwestern University, has published extensively on identity formation, specifically on "personal myth" and narrative identity. According to McAdams, the personal myth is

[A] special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole [...] A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future. ("Stories" 12)

McAdams' theory of identity is centered on the idea that individuals create and understand themselves through the formation of a story that integrates their many and fragmented experiences into some sort of whole ("Stories" 11). Drawing on Erik Erikson's mid-twentieth century work on psychosocial identity, McAdams emphasizes how adolescence and early adulthood is a significant phase of identity formation. According to Erikson, adolescence is the fifth stage in human development (termed Identity vs. Identity Diffusion) and it is "the last and the concluding stage of childhood." (For a comprehensive overview of Erikson's stages, see Appendix II.) It is during this time that a young individual faces "with dire urgency...choices and decisions which will, with increasing immediacy, lead to a more final self-definition, to irreversible role pattern, and thus to

commitments 'for life'" (Erikson 111). Erikson's phases of development are not clearly defined by age so much as maturation, but studies have been done across age groups to determine approximate ages to connect to his phases. The results of various studies revealed that the phase discussed here (Phase 5: Identity vs. Identity Diffusion) occurred in "late adolescence," specifically it was identifiable in university students, but was not seen in high school students (Meeus and Hamilton 88-89). Mead connects to Erikson and McAdams on this point of identity formation. Mead also emphasizes that transitioning can bring about identity conflict as parts of the "old" self are shed in order for the new self to harmonize with his surroundings ("The Social Self"). McAdams and Erikson contextualize some of these changes within late adolescence or early adulthood which is when students are beginning college. In light of these psychologists' understanding of identity formation and previously mentioned composition scholars' connections between the self and personal writing, it is evident why personal writing could be especially meaningful during the first year of college.

According to Erikson and McAdams' psychoanalytic research, it is during late adolescence, then, that significant identity formation is occurring. This is a vital time for students to engage in personal writing in order to be more aware of those "choices and decisions which will, with increasing immediacy, lead to a more final self-definition" (Erikson 111). Although other fields of study have recognized this time as pivotal for maturation and identity formation, composition studies scholarship has not yet linked personal writing in the first year to this developmental phase. Our research foci has remained primarily on either the written product or the process of writing, without much focus on the transitions the writer is facing in regards to identity construction in their first year of college. These theories can inform our perceptions of first-year students and their self-development. By considering these additional theories and by creating personal writing spaces for

first-year students, composition studies can extend its vision of writing for incoming students to encompass out-of-class writing.

McAdams says that adolescence is the time when individuals first begin to focus on their experiences as a source of identity, but that it is during late adolescence or young adulthood that the personal myth is formed ("Stories" 13, 40). McAdams explains, "From adolescence onward we face this task of creating an integrative life story through which we are able to understand who we are and how we fit into the adult world" ("Stories" 91). Again, McAdams' theory connects to Mead's theory, but gets more specific with the college age group. Mead might see the "adult world" as a community, containing certain attitudes and behaviors the individual would construct into a "generalized other." The individual then has to adjust himself to that community, or generalized other.

According to McAdams, during this time of identity formation, individuals may experience what Erikson termed "psychosocial moratorium." This is "the interval between youth and adulthood" (Erikson 104).

Young people in moratorium actively explore new alternatives in life. They experiment with new and different attitudes about God, sex, politics, and life-style. They try on new roles and relationships. They buck the conventions of their childhoods by constructing new frameworks for understanding themselves and their worlds. They become creative historians as they experiment with different ways of making sense of their early years, their relationships with their parents, and even their ethnic, religious, and class roots.

(McAdams "Stories" 92)

An important part of the quote above is when McAdams points out that adolescents are trying on "new roles and relationships" during this time. Psychosocial moratorium, as defined by Erikson and elaborated on by McAdams, connects to Mead's theory of "self" development. Both Mead's theory

of the self and Erikson's psychosocial moratorium emphasize experimentation or role-taking. Mead further explains this as necessary to perceive oneself as an object in order to become self-conscious. This role-taking is one way personal writing can be especially beneficial to college students, as it provides a way for them to try on different genres, voices, and to experiment with interpretations and outcomes of their experiences. The creative aspect of writing allows students to "explore new alternatives in life" in a safe but imaginative way (McCartney).

Both Erikson and McAdams discuss society-sanctioned arenas that cultivate psychosocial moratorium. McAdams speaks specifically of college as one of the "safe havens and settings for experimentation" that individuals are offered during this phase of development ("Stories" 92). He writes, "The college years provide one of the most effective environments our society has discovered for nurturing psychosocial moratorium" ("Stories" 93). According to McAdams, it is during this time that individuals are making dramatic revisions to their self-defining myth ("Stories" 95). However, this personal myth does not simply take on significance as it is created within the individual. It takes on meaning as it is shared with others through relational communication. McAdams explains that much of our everyday conversation is a relating of our experiences with others. "Stories told at a day's end create a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audience," he writes. "Identity is something of a collaboration between the personal and the social world" ("Stories" 94-95). Mead also emphasizes that communication enables one to become self-conscious and allows experiences to take on meaning ("Self"). (Additionally, there is a whole area of scholarship in Student Affairs that contains multiple theories of self-development, specifically in college students. See Kinser and Forest.)

These theories of identity formation and human development are especially significant if we consider scholars' recent calls for us to revisit simplified characterizations of first-year students. These insights invite us to reconsider the primary focus on academic writing in college and

recognize the significance of balancing it with the personal. As composition scholars have shown, personal writing provides reflection on and a greater understanding of the self.

The inclusion of personal writing at the university is the first step to address this area of composition studies that has not yet been fully explored. Scholarship has shown that writing groups can be an ideal alternative setting for this form of writing. However, the research typically focuses on writing in the broader community rather than providing these alternative writing settings at the university for students.

Extracurricular Writing Groups

Many scholars in our field argue that there needs to be a greater recognition of literacy sites beyond the classroom. With the emergence of New Literacy Studies in the 1990s, much advancement was made in terms of recognizing multiple settings for literacy practices, researching how culture influences literacy, and investigating the social and hierarchical aspects of discourse. Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz overview the progression of these movements in composition studies in their 2001 article, "Literacy and Learning Out of School: A Review of Theory and Research." They show how research on literacy practices beyond the classroom has positively influenced our academic theories. And yet, Hull and Schultz argue that *more* attention needs to be given to individuals' varied literacy sites and that our pedagogical approaches need to be open to influence from them. They request research to be done on alternative learning contexts, and ask, "How can teachers and researchers learn about and participate in communities apart from school in a respectful and reciprocal manner?" (577, 603). David Barton and Mary Hamilton in the introduction to their book, *Literacy Practices*, argue that formal education receives stronger support than alternative literacy settings (12). Their study and argument calls for more attention to these "less visible and less supported" literacy practices in order to conceptualize the purposes and meanings attached to the various forms of literacy that are a part of everyday life. Gere also argues

that composition studies needs to make room for the literacy settings that fall outside the classroom (what she calls the "extracurriculum"). In her article entitled "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," Gere explores multiple alternative learning settings, including community-based writing groups, where personal writing is the focus. Gere writes, "These writers bear testimony to the fact that writing development occurs outside formal education" (76). Similarly, Ritchie writes, "The language of the individual, of the community, or of the classroom is never a closed system" (156). While we may be growing more aware of the importance of literacy practices beyond the classroom, scholarship suggests that these alternative writing settings deserve more recognition in our field.

Writing groups have consistently been a part of composition studies, but have only recently been researched and recognized as an important alternative writing setting. One of the ways our field recognizes these out-of-school literacy sites is in the form of a writing group (as Gere shows above).

Writing groups are created for a variety of functions. They can serve the classroom atmosphere or exist outside of academia. Typically, writing groups create a community based on a similar interest and allow writers to share their writing and to receive feedback or criticism. Within the classroom this can mean the writing group serves the purpose of editing via peer-revision for academic papers. Outside of the classroom these groups may serve as an arena to share research, to engage in informal writing instruction, to share personal writing, or to assist the participants in getting published or towards some other goal. A writing group may be formed to focus on a particular interest or to achieve a certain task, and the formats, skill levels, sizes, and purposes vary (Gere "Writing Groups"). However, there are some commonalities across all writing groups – including the desire to write and to make that writing more public and social

(Gere "Writing Groups"; Park; Heller). Gere highlights this overarching similarity:

[Writing groups] provide tangible evidence that writing involves human interaction as well as solitary inscription. Highlighting the social dimension enlarges our view of writing because composition studies has, until recently, conceptualized writing as a solo performance. ("Writing Groups" 3)

The social aspect of writing is pivotal. This is what brings together audience and author. It is what allows private works to be received. It is what makes the act of writing meaningful.

Recent publications in education and composition journals show writing groups emerging in numerous school settings. They have found their way into elementary and middle schools (McCarry; J. Allen; Exposito and Del Roasarioi Barillas; Wagner, Close, and Ramsey; Stone) and even high schools (Peterson; Valdata; Wahlenmayer; Biggs). Some of these groups focus on providing writing support for a certain gender or ethnicity and some are simply created to provide young writers with a space to explore writing. Writing groups have also formed at the college and university level – but to provide writing spaces and support for graduate students and faculty members (Friend and Gonzalez; Pasternak et al.; Brooke et al.; Beckstead et al.; Fassinger, Gilliland and Johnson). However, when it comes to undergraduate college students, there is a gap in our scholarship. Somewhere between high school and graduate school, there seems to be little support for personal or creative writing for students. While there certainly must be other writing groups on college campuses, they are not explicitly explored in our field.

Not only are writing groups for undergraduate students missing from composition scholarship, writing groups in general have not received enough attention in composition studies. They have been influential in composition studies' history, but are not prominent in scholarly discussions. Anne Ruggles Gere surveys the influence of writing groups amongst community members as well as writers in her book, *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* and

traces writing groups back to the 1700s. In a later publication (1994), Gere writes that she believes writing groups have fallen outside of composition studies because of the way the field's history is preoccupied with composition *within* composition walls. As a result, she says composition has been limited to "a gatekeeping function" to initiate new college students to the academic discourse. However, Gere recognizes issues with focusing on in-school literacy and solely academic discourse. She writes,

For a significant number of those who survive this initiation, alienation results. These are students who succeed in composition by distancing themselves from persons and experiences important in their everyday lives. Composition thus accomplishes the cultural work of producing autonomous individuals willing to adopt the language and perspectives of others. Composition's extracurriculum frequently serves the opposite function by strengthening ties with the community. ("Kitchen Tables" 89-90)

It is the community aspect of writing groups that Gere cites as the key reason they should be included in our scholarly conversations. She says, "Perhaps the most significant commonality among writing groups appears in what they contribute to our understanding of what it means to write. Specifically, writing groups highlight the social dimension of writing" ("Writing Groups" 3). Gere argues for us to consider the "extracurriculum" in conjunction with the learning that exists within classrooms.

I propose that we avoid an uncritical narrative of professionalization and acknowledge the extracurriculum as a legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects. Such an inclusive perspective can lead us to tap and listen to messages through the walls, to consider how we can learn from and contribute to composition's extracurriculum in our classes. ("Kitchen Tables" 86)

Caroline E. Heller was a participant-observer in a women's writing group in San Francisco for three years and her book, *Until We are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin*, details the purposes of the group. The writing group was based out of the Tenderloin Reflection and Education center which believed "true democracy is contingent upon all citizens developing clear, precise, and powerful voices. The writing workshops were established as places to foster this possibility by bringing the individual reflective process into public places," Heller writes (8). Heller's book overviews the outcomes of the group for both the individual members and for the community at large. In the end, however, Heller returns to the argument that these outcomes and these literacy practices are still left outside of the academy in many ways. Heller attributes this to the binary of personal versus academic, saying, "Historically, much of formal education has been guided by the assumption that learning, in fact, necessitates screening out the affective" (161). Writing groups and other out-of-school literacy sites are too often considered "marginal." She writes, "[I]t is still too rare that the meanings of marginal settings are included in theoretical conversations, much less seen as sources for vital, hopeful knowledge to inform education. Seldom has the academic world looked to such settings to witness the power literacy can have in people's lives" (161). She acknowledges that progress is being made, but as Hull, Schultz, Gere, Barton, Hamilton, and others have argued, this is still an area of composition studies that could benefit from further research. "[W]e are only beginning to understand the powerful role that community-building has in effective learning and literacy settings," Heller writes. "[W]riting should not be looked upon as separate from real life, but rather should be utilized to form meaningful connections to that life" (161, 17). These writing groups can connect the act of writing with life experiences for students if we make space for them on a college campus. With the consistent and fervent cry for the recognition of the "extracurriculum" and the need to foster writing habits in

college students, there is a space for this literacy site, and, as the upcoming chapters will illustrate, there is also a need.

Making Room For Extracurricular Writing Groups

Such scholarship makes space for the emergence of extracurricular writing opportunities for first-year college writers. While composition studies' literature shows exploration in the areas of writing groups, students' identities, and personal writing, there has been little done at the intersection of these three areas of research. To frame this research endeavor in the existing literature and to enrich it with new connections and considerations, I have proposed the following questions:

- 1) What are first-year students' perceptions of the outcomes of an extracurricular writing group?
- 2) How might writing through the transition to college raise awareness of identity formation?
- 3) What are the outcomes of experience-sharing in an extracurricular writing group during the transition to college?

In order to address these questions, I have reviewed relevant literature in multiple areas of study, facilitated a writing group for first-year students at Colorado State University (CSU), and collected data from participants by conducting post-writing group interviews.

I believe extracurricular writing groups for first-year students may provide a way for the previously mentioned benefits of expressive theory to be valued in the field of composition. Writing groups can be an alternative because the main criticisms revolve around utilizing expressivism as classroom pedagogy, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. An extracurricular group captures the benefits of personal writing but works in harmony with existing composition courses. It creates a space where writers can become personally invested in their writing and find pleasure in the writing

process. The social dimension of the writing group enables first-year students to explore their experiences and have their individuality recognized by others while also introducing them to a community of other writers. Additionally, writing personally can complement academic writing instruction and extend some of the same skills. The reflective component of personal writing can assist with individuals' transitions and identity negotiation during their first year of college. Extracurricular writing groups can also open students' view of what counts as literacy at the college level as composition studies will be acknowledging and appreciating the multiplicity that defines English departments – narrative *and* academic prose.

This social aspect of writing groups is ideal for first-year students' personal writing. Transitioning to college is a time during which adolescents are shaping their identity into a more cohesive story and fitting their experiences into the adult world (McAdams "Stories"; Erikson). Personal writing is a means to explore the self, reflect, and try on different voices and roles. Writing groups bring the two together and uniquely provide adolescents a space to explore identity and engage in an alternative writing practice. First-year students are undergoing a great deal of identity formation which personal writing allows them to reflect upon and explore, and writing groups provide the supportive setting for that writing to take place, be heard, and affirmed.

In order to identify connections in the above scholarship, the remainder of this thesis is split into four chapters. The next chapter overviews the methods used to create the writing group and collect interview data. The third chapter introduces the participants, their attitudes toward writing, and their perceptions of how their involvement with the writing group influenced them individually. This chapter will include discussion on the influence of the writing group on their perceptions of identity and writing. The fourth chapter will continue analysis of the collected data, this time with a concentration on how the writing group participants perceived themselves as part of a group and how they viewed writing as collaborative and social. Finally, the fifth chapter will

discuss my own reflections on the purposes of the group and will pose questions for compositionists to consider in light of the data analysis.

Chapter 2

Background and Methodology

As I discussed in the previous chapter, first-year students' acclimation to university life is an area of research that has not been fully explored in current composition studies. First-year students may be adjusting to dorm life, an increased academic workload, separation from family, increased independence as well as financial responsibility, a new social landscape, and more (Lumley and Provenzano). Because of these pivotal changes occurring in a student's life, psychologists have noted that the ethical maturity and identity of the individual is shifting (Perry; McAdams). Reflection upon the influences of college life on the individual's identity would be beneficial for the student. Through the act of writing, these first-year students may be more conscious of the decisions they are making which may shift their identities. Additionally, extracurricular writing groups could provide the opportunity to revisit personal writing in a new way by challenging our characterization of first-year students and by supplementing students' academic writing practices (Gere "Kitchen Tables"; Sullivan; Britton et al.; G. Allen).

In order to make room for first-year students' personal writing, I chose to facilitate a writing group at CSU. In this chapter, I want to explain the creation and facilitation of the writing group in order to provide context for the data I analyze in the next two chapters. My data collection consisted of post-writing group interviews that explore the participants' reflections on the outcomes of their involvement with the group. Therefore, I will overview the nature of the writing group to create a foundation to understand the participants' perceived outcomes. I will then explain the methods employed to gather and analyze the data used in this thesis.

I wanted to form a writing group that was democratic in the sense that the participants collaboratively shaped the group. The creation of the writing group was strongly influenced by Anne Ruggles Gere's works on writing groups and Pat Schneider's book, *Writing Alone and with Others*. Gere emphasized distributing authority amongst writing group members, distinguishing a writing group from a classroom hierarchy, and providing space for unrecognized narratives. Additionally, she offered examples of other writing groups' writing practices and values, which helped me conceptualize and guide the potential group. Schneider's book identified basic principles of a "healthy" writing group which included recognizing unique voices, embodying a nonhierarchical spirit, and respecting confidentiality, and it emphasized the responsibility of the facilitator to participate and take the writers seriously. Both Schneider and Gere's works overviewed potential approaches to organize the group, respond to writing, and cultivate a collaborative atmosphere. These publications provided practical guidance for formation and facilitation of the writing group and embodied my original democratic values. (Gere and Schneider's works employ some of the core values commonly invoked in our field by expressivist and feminist pedagogues. See Ritchie and Boardman; Burnham.)

To assess the potential value of a writing group for first-year college students, I created and facilitated a writing group at Colorado State University which focused on first-year students' experiences to encourage written reflection during this transitional period. The writing group also served as a means for social writing and experience sharing, which could create feelings of community and experience validation (Heller; Gere "Writing Groups"). The group participants did not pay a fee or receive college credit. My study involved interviews after the group finished meeting to assess the outcomes from the participants' views. The interview questions were designed to encourage the students to reflect on the writing group in order to gain a participant evaluation of the outcomes of the group (these interview questions are viewable in Appendix I).

In this chapter I will explain the decisions I made leading up to the group's formation. Next, I will characterize the participants and discuss the way a typical session went. Finally, I will describe the methods of data collection and the approach I took to analyze that data.

Target Demographic

The target demographic for the writing group I facilitated was first-year students at CSU, both male and female, who had an interest in writing and sharing that writing. I first decided to recruit beginning college students partially because of how much I enjoy working with this age group as a CO150 instructor. Additionally, my experiences with all grade levels of college students have revealed distinctions between first-year students and older students. Primarily, these distinctions revolve around the concepts of identity formation and transitions I have discussed previously. From my observations and teaching experiences, first-year students are seeking out relationships with people similar to them, and they are searching for opportunities to build and be a part of a community at college. By focusing the writing group specifically on first-year students, I thought the members would share many similarities (the transitions to college as well as an interest in writing). These similarities are vital to creating bonds between the members and cultivating a comfortable atmosphere conducive to sharing personal writing (Gere, "Writing Groups").

However, I considered difference as vital to the writing group's success also. Joy Ritchie writes about how apparent similarities can be complicated by varied backgrounds. She writes, "Although students often come from similar socio-economic backgrounds and from similar educational experiences, we should not discount the importance of such factors as family, religion, gender, and ethnicity in shaping their individual perspectives" (157). These students may share the transition to college, but the way those transitions would affect them could vary. As a result, it seemed the students would have enough apparent similarities (such as experiencing late adolescence, moving to college) to develop a level of comfort (which is vital when considering

sharing personal writing). But there could be enough differences to invite more varied and rich feedback. Also, these differences could challenge the writers to consider the rhetorical situation and the varied audience members.

I also wanted to ensure the writing group would cultivate different perspectives by including both males and females, despite the fact that my original interest in writing groups had focused on women's writing groups. I did not specify a gender to challenge my own assumptions about women being more interested in personal writing, to allow more first-year students access to the group, to introduce the participants to multiple other writers, and to enrich the group with more varied perspectives. Additionally, I considered the contradictions and conflicts that might emerge due to the mixed-gender setting and thought they could contribute positively to the writing group atmosphere. This decision was influenced by my consideration of Relational Dialectics Theory. This theory, as discussed by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery, argues for the crucial role opposing tendencies play in interaction. They write, "From the perspective of relational dialectics, social life exists in and through people's communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple (perhaps infinite) opposing tendencies" (4). Silencing a potentially conflicting or opposing element by only allowing one gender's voice into the writing group would not necessarily benefit the participants. According to Baxter and Montgomery, healthy relationships are dependent on both tendencies being acknowledged (a "both/and" status) and that it is detrimental to only privilege one tendency (an "either/or" status) (6). By allowing men and women to sign up for the group, this "both/and" status is achieved in the writing group as the potential differences are able to play out and enrich the group. Finally, I thought focusing on one gender might make that group feel as if they needed *more* assistance transitioning to college for some reason; I did not want to imply any special needs for a certain gender.

Once the demographic had been identified, I recruited members for the writing group. I did this by speaking for a few minutes in 6 of my colleagues' sections of CO150. I recruited in this course because the sections are made up primarily of first-year students and I was able to visit these classrooms with ease due to my existing relationships with the instructors. At these classes, I presented a little information about the group, answered questions, and encouraged those interested to sign up. I did not limit the writing group invitation to only those who were in the class, but informed them that any first-year student could check it out, so they could invite their roommates and friends. Additional CO150 course instructors circulated a flier and sign-up for interested students.

Participants

The writing group consisted of five steady members (plus me) during the fall of 2009. The group was comprised of three males (Josh, Jeff, and Scott) and two females (Lianna and Chloe). I will introduce the members in a bit more detail in the next chapter. All of the participants were from Colorado, in their first year of college, and had either been in a class or had been informed by someone who had been in a class where recruitment had taken place. Josh, Jeff, Chloe, and Lianna were all 18 years old when they joined the group, and Scott was 19 years old. Each student was enrolled in a different CO150 class during the fall semester. Josh and Jeff were friends before the group began, but the rest of the group members did not know each other. In terms of their majors, Josh and Jeff were both "undeclared" before the group began, and at the end of the semester had switched to English Education and undeclared with a focus in Journalism and Technical Communication (respectively). Lianna was majoring in Environmental Health at the beginning of the semester, but by the end of the semester had switched her major to English Education. Chloe was and still is majoring in Microbiology, but she added an English minor by the

end of the fall semester. Scott was and still is majoring in Journalism and Technical Communication.

Because the group was interest-based, had no requirements, and the students were very busy, some members were only able to make it to a few of the sessions. Scott and Chloe attended two of the five meetings, Lianna attended three, and Josh and Jeff made it to all five meetings. The varied participation may have impacted my data as Chloe and Scott had less experience in the group. However, my research questions focus on the perceived outcomes of the group, which Chloe and Scott could still reflect on. The data collection took place during the interviews, and each participant contributed perceptions of the group's outcome which provided me with a fuller picture of what value this group may have had for first-year college students.

Terminology

"Writing group" is only one of a variety of names that can be used to describe a community of writers. As Gere has noted, many of names have been used to describe what I am calling a writing group, including helping circles, writing clubs, response groups, workshops, and team writing. Gere states, "The name, of course, matters less than what it describes, which is writers responding to one another's work" (Gere "Writing Groups" 1). The terms I saw used most frequently in the literature were "writing group" and "writing workshop." I use the term "writing group" rather than "writing workshop" because I perceived workshops as focusing more on feedback and revisions, while the group I was facilitating would balance between in-group freewriting and feedback. Also, writing *group* suggested the nonhierarchical structure and collaborative atmosphere I envisioned the group embodying. Essentially, "workshop" felt too formal and "writing group" better captured the atmosphere and purposes I envisioned. However, I do want to point out that these other terms may be used elsewhere to reference projects with purposes similar to my own.

Another term I had to consider was "personal writing." I contemplated whether this group would focus on one specific kind of writing (i.e. creative, autobiographical, etc.). I have seen autobiographical writing, narrative writing, and creative writing defined as distinct things, and yet I saw each of these playing a part in the group. Additionally, I was fascinated with Roy Bentley and Syd Butler's work with what they call "lifewriting" and considered using this term. According to Bentley and Butler, "Simply, [lifewriting] is the putting down on paper of memories, experiences, and thoughts about one's life or even just about an event in that life" (5). Although this term relates to a great deal of the writing I envisioned occurring in the group, I felt it limited the writers because it did not incorporate creative writing or fiction. I wanted the group to be centered on the participants' writing interests, so I avoided putting any limitations on style, genre, or subject matter by using "personal writing" to encompass autobiographical, narrative, and creative writing.

Finally, throughout this thesis I will refer to the individuals who were interviewed for my research as *writers*, *participants*, *first-year students*, or by their first names. Although they were given the option of going by a pseudonym, each of them requested that I use his or her real name.

Creating The Writing Group

The group ran for five weeks as it began in early November and ended about two weeks before final exams. Those two remaining weeks of the semester allowed the participants to focus on their studies and were a window for me to conduct post-writing group interviews before the students left for winter break.

The writing done within the group was not clearly defined before it began. While I considered various ways to structure the sessions, I chose to leave it up to the group. I had facilitated a writing group in the spring, which I consider my "training wheels writing group," and had arrived with simple forms of creative writing that I would briefly explain to the participants and then we would write. Although this was interesting and challenged the writers in terms of writing

under certain time limits and with different styles, I felt like I was preparing a lesson plan. I perceived that, despite my encouragement for the participants to share ideas and contribute, the fact that I showed up with certain plans discouraged their own motivation to help shape the group. In the end, I believe the hierarchy of a classroom slipped into the group, as I arrived with knowledge about writing styles that I then had to impart to the other participants in order for all of us to write together.

In the fall, I refrained from “planning.” This decision was heavily influenced by my deeper reading of Gere and Schneider, and the recognition that my role as facilitator in the spring group had taken on a degree of authority that may have discouraged the participants' collaboration. In the fall group, I had the participants choose whether or not to use literature as models and whether or not we would select a specific topic or form of writing. This deemphasized a hierarchical structure and made the group different from a class. In this sense, the participants were collaboratively facilitating and shaping the group.

My Role

The decisions about facilitation and meeting format lead me into explaining what I perceived my role to be in the writing group. It is important to explain my approach to facilitating the writing group in order to illustrate how the writers' answers to my questions in the interviews (about their involvement in the group) were formed from their collaborative influence on the group, rather than on my influence on their writing experience.

While I had goals and hopes for the writing group, I consciously stepped back to let the participants co-facilitate the meetings so as not to guide the interactions to achieve what I wanted. As mentioned above, I had decided that this writing group would not take on a hierarchical structure with an instructor and students. Anne Ruggles Gere writes in *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* about the differences between academic and non-academic writing

groups. One of the primary distinctions she identifies relates to this very issue of hierarchy (or lack thereof). She writes, "Because authority resides ultimately in individual members of self-sponsored groups, the relationship among them is essentially nonhierarchical and gives more emphasis to cooperation than competition." She continues, "In school-sponsored groups, by contrast, authority originates in the instructor... This hierarchy undercuts the empowerment of individuals common in self-sponsored writing groups" (50-51). Gere explains that extracurricular writing groups are collaborative or nonhierarchical because they allow authority to be distributed among the members who contribute their writing to the group.

To refrain from establishing a hierarchy or leading the writing group to my purposes instead of allowing the participants to bring the group to its own purpose, I did the following:

- On the first day I asked the members what purpose they wanted the group to serve
- I explained some of the different ways I thought we could spend our time (forms, styles, prompts, examples, etc.) and asked what they would prefer we focus on
- I expressed my inexperience with creative writing to reduce hierarchy
- I did not restrict our writing ideas to a focus on college experiences but incorporated those topics in with their other ideas
- I requested prompts from other members and made sure to democratically let the group decide what to write about at that time, how long we would write, and what we would write about next
- I referred to everyone by the first name or collectively as "writers" so as not to emphasize a 'student' vs. 'instructor' hierarchy
- I encouraged participants to share if they wanted, but emphasized that they did not have to, and then modeled this myself by sharing my own writing at times and at other times choosing to refrain

- I responded to writing encouragingly and gradually allowed longer wait times for other participants to step up and provide feedback to fellow writers – this showed participants how to respond without ever taking on an instructor role, and then I slipped back so that the group members themselves engaged with each other
- I was present and participating in the group and refrained from taking notes during the meetings, which may have made them feel observed or evaluated

These decisions were a mixture of reflecting on and learning from my experiences running the group in the spring and my utilization of Schneider's suggested "Basic Principles for a Healthy Workshop" in *Writing Alone and with Others* (185-195).

I came to the group as a fellow writer. Although I was not a first-year student, I wrote along on the prompts and reflected on my first year in college or on my more recent transition to graduate school and Colorado. The students knew I was a composition instructor, I was pursuing my Master's, and that I was a few years older, but they did not seem to feel a distinct difference between my place in the group and theirs as we got to know each other. From the comments in the interviews, they seemed to perceive me as a guiding force rather than an instructor, one who made sure we did not get too side-tracked with random stories and forget to actually start writing or as someone who always had a few writing ideas in mind if everyone else drew a blank.

In regards to my data collection goals, I chose to wait on telling the participants about my research or inviting them to partake in the interview process. This was an important decision that required a great deal of reflection. I chose to wait to tell the students about the research because I wanted the writing group to serve a purpose unique and specific to them without influencing it by alerting them to my researcher role. Since I am studying the students' perceived *outcomes* of the writing group, I felt it was unnecessary for them to be aware of the research during the life of the group. I wanted the participation in the group to be authentic rather than performed and the

outcomes the writers recognized to be sincere rather than formulated. I perceived that defining myself as a researcher could compromise the role I have described above as well as the collaborative, authoritative role I encouraged the participants to play.

The Shape Of The Group

A few decisions the group made together included having the choice to write in any form or style they wanted, always having music in the background as we wrote, making reading one's own writing completely optional, having every member try to contribute writing ideas and feedback, and deciding the time to write and the prompts to focus on a collaborative decision. In these ways, the participants continually had their voices influence the direction of the writing group session. This helped me preserve my role, and helped them create and maintain their own role in the group.

Each week, we met on Thursday night at 6:30 p.m. The location varied a couple times, with three of the five meetings taking place in a classroom on campus, one meeting taking place in a conference room, and the final meeting taking place in a café off campus (as a sort of celebratory end to the group). The sessions typically began with the first 15 minutes or so consisting of story-sharing and chatting as the participants would slip in, grab a snack, and get out their writing materials. After talking about the week and about outside writing, eventually we would focus on writing as a group. Usually for about 10 minutes we would share potential "writing ideas" (early on in the group, the writers said they did not like the word "prompt" and preferred "ideas" instead). Within this brainstorming session, writers would inevitably exclaim that they had an idea from some one else's idea, or would start to tell a story relating to the idea. We always had to rein ourselves in and refocus on getting to the actual *writing*, as the participants were enthusiastic, outgoing, and eager to socialize. Reflecting the feminist pedagogy values I have encountered, we would vote on which idea to write about first and then we would suggest a length of time to write. Usually we would get through three or four writing ideas each session. Everyone contributed writing ideas on a

mixture of topics. However, each week there was at least one (suggested by me or another writer) that focused on personal experiences at college that semester. There was a nice balance between remembering past experiences, writing creatively/fiction, and writing about current transitions. (To see some of the writing prompts created by the group, see Appendix III.)

After the free-writing time, nearly every single writer (surprisingly) shared what he or she wrote. The forms, foci, tone, and style varied for each individual. Some of the written responses were humorous, some were self-reflective, some were autobiographical memories, and some were stories about other people. Some writers were drawn to poetry, some to journal-like writing, some to descriptive story-telling, some to stream-of-consciousness, and some to dialogue. At first the feedback responses were brief, and I was usually first to point out something about the piece. After the first two weeks, however, this shifted as the writers grew comfortable with sharing their writing, hearing others share, and voicing feedback. Sometimes the feedback would slip into the listeners relaying similar experiences the shared piece had reminded them of. After each person who felt like reading did so and was acknowledged, we would recap the writing ideas we had come up with at the beginning of the session and vote again on which one to write on and for how long. At the very end of the group meeting, we would come up with at least two writing ideas to take home with us to encourage writing during the week when we weren't together. The topics varied depending on the writing ideas the writers brought in.

I reserved our room for two hours each week but assumed that the participants would probably want to leave earlier than that. To my surprise, every single meeting ended up going *over* the two hours by at least 15 minutes. This was partially because of our inability to commit to certain time constraints, so sometimes our last writing idea would start too close to the end and we would write longer. Primarily, however, this was because of the community that was established in the

group – they wanted to talk for a bit longer in order to share experiences and plans for the upcoming week.

This explanation of the formation and facilitation of the writing group provides the necessary background to understand the writers' perceptions of the group's outcomes. When the writers reference particular writing prompts or writing experiences, it is important that these references are understood as they are described above – with each of the writers shaping and influencing the group sessions.

Data Collection

I collected data using qualitative methods because they clearly aligned with my research goals. Qualitative research focuses on “the meanings people attach to things in their lives”; it begins with “vaguely formulated” research questions in order to be open to what the data reveals rather than testing a preconceived hypothesis; it allows for the emphasis on meaning (or validity) rather than replicability or reliability; it recognizes the importance of all perspectives and settings (Taylor and Bogdan 7-10; Strauss and Corbin 5, 11).

Within the qualitative approach, I chose to use interviews to collect my data rather than participant-observation methods, though I was involved in the group. As previously mentioned, the above descriptions of the writing group are meant to provide background for the data, but the data was collected after the writing group was completed in the fall of 2009. Because no data was collected during the time I was involved in the group, I was limited to a participant-facilitator rather than a participant-observer role (Taylor and Bogdan 25). Interviewing was ideal because I had a relatively clear idea of what I wanted to find out (the outcomes of the group based on participants' reflections) and did not need to be a participant-observer to recognize my interests.

At the final group session in fall of 2009, I explained to the participants my research interests and invited them to partake in the interview process. Those that were not in attendance

were emailed, informed of the interviews, and asked if they would be interested in participating. Out of the five consistent members, all were willing to be interviewed. Each participant read and signed a consent form prior to meeting with me, and gave me the form before the interview began. I was able to interview all of the participants within a week of the final group meeting. I chose to do this partially because the semester was drawing to a close but primarily so the details of the writing group experience were fresh in their minds. I met with the participants for somewhere between 30 – 70 minutes in the student center on campus. I asked each participant if he or she would prefer to go by a pseudonym when referenced in my thesis, but all of them wished to go by their real names, and a few admitted their eagerness to see their names in print (they will each be introduced in the next chapter).

The interviews had a relaxed structure with open questions that I occasionally diverged from to ask questions for further elaboration or for clarification. There were between 8-10 questions prepared for participants to answer (see Appendix I) with some room left for the participants to shape the direction of the interview (see Lofland).

The interviews were conducted in person, one-on-one, on campus. We met outside a coffee shop, found a table, and chatted as I set up my laptop and microphone. The interviews were very conversational and casual, partially because I was already familiar with these writers and partially because I wanted them to feel comfortable sharing their honest reflections on the group. As a result, I conducted the interviews in a manner that was both friendly and inquisitive. Because of the desire to achieve the conversational tone, I asked questions and occasionally prompted the participants to elaborate or responded encouragingly to their responses. At times, we went off on friendly tangents, recounting certain writing group sessions or talking about potential writing ideas to use in the future. I did not have a particular order that I asked the questions in, and occasionally a writer's response to one question would prompt me to ask another question beyond what I had

written out. These questions all focused on understanding how the writers described the outcomes of the group on their individual perspectives.

The longest interviews were around an hour long and these were the interviews with Josh, Jeff, and Lianna, the writers most involved in the group. Their reflection on the group's influence on them involved more detail and examples. Also, they had established a stronger relationship with me from participating more in the group, and our interviews contained more personal tangents from the questions. I allowed these tangents and did not try to maintain a strict focus on the specific questions because of my desire to have this be a conversation where they could explore their thoughts on the group. Additionally, these tangents occasionally revealed more insights into the group and the participant's feelings about college or transitions. Scott and Chloe both contributed helpful insights but had fewer writing group sessions to reflect on, and their interviews were each roughly a half hour. Their responses were more directly focused on the questions, with only the occasional tangent or side conversation.

Limitations

Between the literature review and this methodology section, I have clarified the nature of the writing group I created as well as my rationale for its importance. Essentially, I have explained what this thesis will focus on, but now I would like to pause and acknowledge what this thesis will *not* focus on, or is unable to explore at this time.

First of all, this thesis is only utilizing the participants' reflections on the writing group after the group concluded. I believe including samples of the writing that was produced within the group or conversations that occurred during sessions or detailed notes from our meetings would enrich and better exemplify and support these perceptions. However, as I mentioned above, collecting these other forms of data could have been somewhat invasive and may have compromised some of the integrity of the group.

Other limitations I recognize are that the writing group only met weekly for five weeks, and it did not begin until about half-way through the fall semester. The writing group participants still grew very comfortable and close over these five weeks, and, as you will see in the upcoming chapters, the group meant a great deal to them. However, I do believe increasing the duration of the group may have revealed even more significant data. The five weeks was simply a result of time taken to organize and recruit, time constraints relating to my other graduate school commitments, and time spent getting IRB H100 approval. Running the group for a longer period of time may have allowed the participants to have more experiences and better informed opinions of the group's purposes.

An additional limitation may be that my data rests entirely on one interview with each participant. Although it is beneficial that I was able to interview *all* members of the group and to do so within a week after the group ended, I was unable to conduct multiple interviews. I do think multiple interviews may have benefitted this thesis by providing a better measurement of sincerity in the participants' responses. I am reminded of Erving Goffman's discussion on how people manage impressions and perform differently through interaction depending on settings and expectations (Goffman). In any interview, there is likely a degree of performance (especially with the participants being aware I was recording the interview). With only the one interview, I cannot be sure how many of the outcomes the writing group members identified were actually meaningful enough to stick with them well beyond the fall group's lifespan.

While I do argue for space to be made for personal writing groups in the university community, it falls outside of the scope of this project to address the practical application of structuring this into English departments. At this time, my argument is for composition studies to consider the importance for this space to be made, and perhaps in the future I will be able to tackle the "how?" question. This thesis will explore the participants' reflections on the outcomes of the

group, and structural and application discussions shift away from the data collection and research I invested in at this time.

Another aspect that is related but not the focus of this thesis is the direct impact an extracurricular writing group may have on composition classrooms or academic writing. While I have read (and will reference) studies done on the potential of personal writing benefitting academic writing, this is not the focal point of this thesis. I explore the writers' perceptions of academic and personal writing but do not study the influences of one on the other. Based on the participants' attitudes towards the different kinds of writing and the meaning they ascribed to being able to engage in both, I would speculate that the writing group *can*, in many ways, complement composition instruction. However, my research only reveals these participants' reflections on what a writing group means to them and then argues that these reflections are significant – the pedagogical implications are not at the heart of this undertaking.

Data Analysis

Once I began working with the data from the interviews, I set out to take the individual responses and group them together by question asked. However, as I continually read through the interviews, it became apparent that certain related topics were appearing under various questions, so I identified the categories that were surfacing from the data. In this way, I allowed the theoretical focus and interpretation of the data to emerge from the research process (Strauss and Corbin 12). Before mentioning the categories the data revealed, I want to emphasize that these categories are *not* wholly representative of the purposes and meanings the participants had ascribed to the group. I fear that, as Heller said, by creating categories I may be “oversimplifying the highly personalized meanings and purposes” represented in these participants' perceptions of the writing group (17). I attempt to flesh out the complexity and significance in these perceptions by relying on the participants' interview responses heavily in the upcoming two chapters. However, the categories

may prove helpful for organizational purposes. My suggestion is to recognize these categories as broad and sometimes overlapping titles that are only proven meaningful by their subparts. The categories that I identified include:

- Attitudes towards Writing Practices
- Rationales for Writing Personally and/or Socially
- Recognition of Transitions
- Reflections on Identity
- Expectations, Apprehensions about Sharing Writing
- Influence of the Social Aspect

As you can imagine, each of these categories includes several subcategories. For example, "Influence of the Social Aspect" could include the participants' reflections on making personal writing public, on the resulting relationships that were formed, on the influence of socializing on their motivation to write, on the significance of knowing a supportive network of other writers, on having an audience for their writing, or on the methods of receiving/giving feedback on writing in a group. The subcategories that enrich and define the aforementioned categories will be developed and explored throughout the next two chapters. The next chapter (#3) explores the significance of the group to the individual, and the following chapter (#4) explores the reflections on the social element the group embodied.

With these categories in mind, it is important to also consider how those categories of responses were then analyzed or considered significant to me and this thesis. As discussed in the literature review, there are many voices that influence my approach to this topic, including composition scholars, interpersonal communication theorists, psychology theorists, and of course, the participants themselves. First, I want to explain my decisions about integrating the students' responses, and then I want to explain how I analyzed those responses. In the upcoming chapters,

the five writing group participants' comments initiate the discussion on personal writing, writing groups, and identity. I relied on their reflections heavily by incorporating numerous quotes from the interviews because I felt their voices should be prominent in this argument. As a result, I brought the students' voices into this argument and chose to leave informal colloquialisms in the quotes from their interviews. Therefore, their quotes include pauses and other informal characters of speech, such as the words "like" and "um." I left these in partially because the nuances of each individual's speech can enrich or better portray the individual. Also, I left the colloquialisms so I did not unintentionally misrepresent the speaker's message. Finally, I wanted to preserve the authority of the students to speak about their own experiences rather than have me interpret their experience. By relying on the participants' quotes, I hope to truly address my research questions by analyzing the outcomes of the group from the participants' perspectives, rather than from my own perspective. Additionally, scholars such as Ivanic, Sullivan, and Bartholomae have asserted that students' voices are often placed outside of the academic discourse and I wanted to resist that by bringing their considerations into this thesis. Also, I am resisting the assumption that personal and academic are opposing as I integrate the personal stories and considerations of these first-year students in this argument to an academic audience.

Now, I want to explain how I then analyzed the students' comments. While I have integrated various scholarly voices from different fields of study into my analysis, I have consistently relied upon George Herbert Mead to analyze and understand the participants' reflections, particularly their thoughts on socialization and identity. Mead's theory links individual identity, interaction, and community. As a result, I sought to interpret these writers' evaluations of the writing group's significance through some of Mead's concepts.

Mead's theory of the self provides me with a few different concepts and categories of development that I want to explain as they helped me interpret my data. I chose to revisit Mead's

theory of the self from the early 20th century because of his foundational concepts that have informed or connected to the other theories on identity formation that I have read. He has continually served as a way for me to interpret and analyze my data and the other scholarship on self-development. His concepts are broader than some other theories I have read, as Mead sees the process of self-development as containing individual, reflective phases as well as social, collective phases. Finally, Mead's theory has been applied to student writing and identity formation by Robert McCartney, who published an article entitled "Constructing the Self through Writing" in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. This has informed my own application and understanding of Mead's particular theory of self for this thesis. Mead's theory frames my interpretation of the data I collected, specifically his discussion on reflective intelligence, role-taking to become an object to oneself, significant communication, the "generalized other," and shaping one's own attitudes and behavior in order to align with the community. Mead explores these concepts in the chapter on "Self" from his book *On Social Psychology* and in an article he wrote entitled "The Social Self."

Mead frames the creation of the self as a social process where the individual must reflect on his experiences and interaction ("Self" 200, 206). Through what Mead calls an "inner conversation," an individual must consider his actions and how those actions will spark a response in those around him before he chooses how to behave ("Self"). Mead terms this thought process "reflective intelligence," which McCartney explains is "temporarily inhibiting action so that one can consider alternative ways of responding to social situations" (Mead "Self" 206; McCartney 123). This concept applies to my data as the writing group participants identified writing as a way for them to work through confusing situations and "clear their heads." Reflective intelligence is achieved through writing as these first-year students considered different behaviors and attitudes toward their surroundings in their pieces. McCartney relates this to writing, saying, "Among other purposes the intent of [reflective] writing can be to explore alternative choices before commitment,

to understand and develop the concept of the self, and to discover, rather than simply present, knowledge" (124). Because the class setting is hierarchical and not always conducive to exploratory, self-directed personal writing, a writing group is the ideal space for first-year writers to explore "self" through writing and reflect on potential actions.

Reflective intelligence is closely linked to another part of Mead's theory – taking the role of the other. According to Mead, by taking on the perspective of other people, an individual is able to perceive himself as an object. For example, I become conscious of my "self" when I see myself and my actions through the eyes of another person. Then I can step outside of my "inner conversation" and look at myself as an object. Trying on other roles and seeing myself from different views helps me organize my behavior. Mead says that one becomes an object to himself once he is affected by his own experiences as he would be by someone else's ("The Social Self" 375; "Self" 206). For example, if I said something cruel about another person, then reflected on myself from a different perspective and was shocked (affected) that I had said such a mean thing, then I have become an object to myself. Mead writes, "[S]o far as I can see, the individual is not a self in the reflective sense unless he is an object to himself. It is this fact that gives a critical importance to communication, since this is a type of behavior in which the individual does so respond to himself" ("Self" 206). The writing group enabled the first-year students to take their experiences, put them on paper, and read them to an audience. As a result, the writers noted multiple times in their interviews that they saw themselves in a different way after looking at what they had written or after reading it out loud to others. In this way, these writers were able to see themselves as objects as they were affected by their own works. Additionally, through writing, the author can try on different roles to look at his or her experiences through different lenses. This also enables an individual to become an object to himself. (Mead's terminology, particularly his description of objectifying the self, may feel awkward, but remember his theory was developed in the early 1900s.) McCartney

shows how Mead's concept applies to writing, saying, "[Writers] can easily draw on a facility for taking roles, a facility acquired during the ongoing development of the self" (122). It is through writing the self into different roles and then sharing the writing with others that the participants in my writing group became more aware of themselves.

This leads to another concept Mead emphasizes, that forming a self is a social process. Mead notes that reflection can only go on for a certain period before the individual must interact with others ("Self" 206). And "significant communication" – which is "directed not only to others but also to the individual himself" – is the means through which a self is "introduced" ("Self" 203). It is through communication that "the character is found" and an individual's actions receive meaning ("Self" 210). All of the writing group participants identified the social aspect of the writing group as one of the most significant aspects of their experience with the group. In their interviews, they discussed how having a space to share their experiences with other first-year students influenced them and their approach to writing. The writing group is unique because of the way it combines Mead's reflective intelligence (an individual act) with significant communication with others – both of which are necessary to develop the self.

According to Mead, the self is not constructed solely through taking on the role of the other, but it is also through organizing the self in relationship to a community. Mead calls the interpretation of the whole community's attitude the "generalized other" that the individual then seeks to organize his own attitudes into ("Self" 218, 223). This relates to the first-year students as they have arrived in college and are making an effort to join the community of the university. They are in the process of organizing the attitudes of that community into a generalized attitude that they then seek to represent as they become a part of that community. The writing group participants explored a few different aspects of the broad university community in their writing, as they generalized the attitudes of their peers toward school, they generalized the attitudes of the

university toward writing, and they generalized the attitudes of "writers" – and then they worked to situate themselves in these communities. It is through relating the self to this "generalized other" that the individual reaches a "unity of self," according to Mead ("Self" 218, 223). This is why the individual reflects on his actions and what responses they might call out in others, and why he takes on the role of the other – to find out if his behaviors and attitudes align with others in that community and thus with the community as a whole. The first-year students' interview responses illustrate some of this process of reflecting on the community and situating the developing self into that community.

Finally, Mead says in the process of aligning the self to the community, conflicts can arise as elements of the "old self" must shift and give way to the attitudes of the community, or the "new self" (Mead "The Social Self" 378-379). In order for the new self to fully emerge, "there is some disintegration" of the old self ("The Social Self" 378). The individual must "harmonize the conflicting interests" of the old self and the generalized other in order to belong to the community and reach "unity of self" ("The Social Self" 379). This is especially significant when looking at the interview data, as the participants reflected on their transition from high school to college, and from being teenagers to being adults. In this time of transition, these writers were altering or letting go of parts of their old selves as they negotiated possible new selves. McCartney emphasizes how college students can benefit from reflective writing precisely because of this identity negotiation that Mead discusses. McCartney writes that when one is negotiating between an old and a new role, "dissonance" results. The transitional period between roles, according to McCartney, "becomes a problem that the act of writing helps us to resolve" (125).

In concert with other composition and psychology scholars, Mead provides a useful framework for understanding the writers' thoughts on identity, interaction and community. My

analysis will utilize his theory primarily to explore the self-development the writers' responses suggest.

In the next two chapters, I will present and analyze the results of my data collection (the interviews). In chapter three, I will focus on the writers' discussion of the writing group's influence on them as individuals. This will include analysis of their articulation of the attitudes of the college community (the "generalized other") and their individual adjustment to that community. In chapter four I will look at the outcomes the writers identified that related to the social aspect of the writing group. Specifically, I will analyze how these first-year students related themselves to a community of writers and became more aware of their identities as writers and individuals.

Chapter 3

Writing The Self: “Seeing What You Write Kinda Shows You What Or How You Are”

With the recognition that there are gaps in composition studies' research, I have proposed extracurricular writing groups for first-year students as a potential means to address those gaps. Now, I would like to turn our attention to the end-of-semester interviews I conducted with the members from the group I facilitated at CSU. I will analyze the participants' perceived outcomes collected from these interviews to consider how this group functioned for the individual writers. I will first describe the writers who participated in the group. The remainder of the chapter presents and analyzes the participants' reflections on their attitudes toward writing, themselves as writers, and themselves as individuals coming into college.

“We’re The Writing Groupies”

As Jeff claimed, the five individuals who participated in this study became the “writing groupies” – each of whom influenced the group with unique personality traits and writing interests. Since this chapter and the next present and analyze the individuals' perceptions of the writing group, it is important to provide a more personal depiction of each of them. With a mixture of contrasts (such as Chloe, Josh, and Lianna's hesitancy to share and Scott and Jeff's outgoing and enthusiastic personalities) the individuals' comments illustrate how they grew as a group and as writers.

Lianna was more willing to define herself as a writer at the start of the group than some of the other participants. She mentioned previous projects she had begun but put aside due to "writer's block" and she characterized her interests as rooted in "historical fiction." While her enthusiasm for writing was not displayed in the energetic way Jeff's was, she contributed to the group with her consistent desire to write and to take writing projects seriously. She even showed up at the first session with a writing prompt book she used on her own, and typically finished reading her pieces in the group by saying she could see herself turning the free-write into a novel or play. Her writing showed a passion for dialogue, description, irony, and suspense. True to her description of herself, she was fascinated with history; when responding to the prompt "I am from..." she depicted herself as from 18th century England and during the semester she began a story based on a deceased relative's involvement with the Chicago mob in the early 1900s. She tended to write stories more than poems or any other form, and these stories were typically creative non-fiction. Lianna's attitude contributed to the group's community as she showed the greatest appreciation for a group of writers. She treasured the "inside jokes" and camaraderie amongst the writers, and expressed gratitude for the shared humor and interests of the group. Perhaps this is because she took writing more seriously and wanted to find and belong to a community of other writers.

Scott and Chloe were each only able to attend two meetings, so it was more difficult to get a broad view of their writing styles and interests. However, each contributed to the group's dynamic and participated avidly when he or she was present.

Scott, like Jeff, had an enthusiasm for writing and sharing it right from the beginning. He was confident with expressing himself through writing and appeared comfortable sharing his talents with the group. His attraction to writing seemed to be rooted in a desire to depict the adventures of his life. He used vivid detail to relay stories from his past and read them in an enthusiastic,

confident way that captured the writing group's attention. He is a laid-back, creative, and friendly individual who encouraged the other members of the group to share their writing or to tell stories. His ease with writing and his eagerness to capture (and share) his own experiences brought confidence and energy to the group.

Chloe arrived at the second meeting and jumped in without hesitation. She is an outgoing, easy-going, comical person to interact with, and her writing reflected those same traits. She enjoyed telling stories to illustrate what she found funny in everyday activities and interactions. Her writing interests centered more on light, humorous story-telling from her own experiences than serious reflection or fiction writing. Her openness to share, her quick, easy laughter, and her participation added to the group's friendly and accepting atmosphere.

Each of these writers offered interesting perspectives on the outcomes of the writing group. Their comments about college and personal writing reveal their attempts to understand the attitudes and values of the community they are joining. Discussing their attitudes toward writing is important since these new students are interpreting the university's attitudes and expectations about what college writing is. As the following descriptions will show, there is some dissonance as the participants' previous attitudes or values about writing do not clearly parallel those of their new community. Therefore, they will be in the process of adjusting to the new attitudes.

Contrasting Attitudes Toward Writing

Robert J. Graham writes in his article, "The Self as Writer: Assumptions and Identities in the Writing Workshop," that instructors would benefit from inspecting the "assumptions and images some students bring with them about writers and about the act of writing itself" (358). According to Graham, these assumptions are often "unexamined" prior to writing instruction. Before discussing these students' perceptions of a writing group, I think it is important to review their attitudes toward writing. During the interviews, the writers reflected on their own personal attitudes toward writing.

Jeff was one of the first writers I met, and he stuck out to me immediately – probably because his personality contrasted my idea of a contemplative writer. Jeff possesses an outgoing, eager, goofy, distracted sort of personality. Fortunately, his personality is precisely what made him so vital to the group. Jeff was the first to share what he wrote with the group and his humor and warmth set the tone for others to feel comfortable sharing what they wrote. He consistently offered to be the first to read after each prompt. Jeff's writing also depicts a very sincere, heartfelt, curious individual. He is drawn to poetry and has a knack for description and clever word-play. Jeff was the most open to sharing his thoughts, emotions, and experiences with an audience, perhaps out of an eagerness to receive recognition for his experiences and realizations.

Josh and Jeff were friends in high school and joined the group together. Unlike Jeff, Josh was quieter during the first couple weeks. He was more likely than any of the other writers to politely pass on reading what he wrote and would defer to others when trying to come up with writing ideas. This changed significantly during the third week when only Josh and Jeff attended. It was in this more intimate group that Josh contributed writing ideas and shared what he wrote. He showed an interest in revisiting stereotypes and societal expectations and suggested writing prompts that revolved around challenging gender roles and predictable life paths. He revealed himself as a reflective writer who is intrigued by contradictions and metaphors. His writing was typically in essay or stream-of-consciousness form, and he often wrote his interpretations of relationships and his surroundings in analytical and satirical ways. Josh displayed a unique blend of pensive inquiry, critical insight, and humorous mockery. By the end of the fall group, Josh shared a great deal of what he wrote and contributed numerous thought-provoking writing ideas. Although he cast himself as someone who did not have good ideas, his writing prompts and the pieces he shared were consistently responded to with admiration and appreciation by the other writers.

Prior to the writing group, their consistent writing activities in college were assignments from classes. Joining the writing group added to their college writing activities by incorporating more personal writing in conjunction with academic. Their comments here show their perceptions of the attitudes of the university toward writing practices which we should be conscious of, and they express the struggles they face as they negotiate their own perceptions and adjust to the university community.

Academic Writing

I overviewed briefly in the literature review how the focus on academic writing in college courses can leave students feeling detached or inferior (Ivanic; Newkirk; Sullivan). Although those sources provide an *idea* of what academic writing can look like from a students' perspective, the theoretical viewpoints and goals of these scholars can leave one questioning the generalizability or truth of this view. When the writing group participants identified a distinction between personal writing and writing for class, I asked them to elaborate. I found through the interviews that the scholars' views hold true in many ways, specifically at the site of my data collection. These first-year students' descriptions show the validity and relevance of the broader research perspectives to the site of my own research and teaching experiences.

In the interviews, all of the participants said their writing activity before the group consisted of writing for class, and they said this writing was typically not creative or very open to their own experiences. Scott and Lianna were the only participants who said they sporadically engaged in personal writing in college, but said it was outside of their classes.

To understand how these writers were defining "writing for class" I asked them to describe the way they felt about and used that writing. There seemed to be four consistent characteristics they felt defined academic writing. They described academic writing as arguments and research

papers, assignments with restrictions about what topics they could choose, writing that followed strict conventions, and as something they had to do for the teacher or a grade.

According to the first-year students who were interpreting the university's writing values, most paper assignments included research and argumentation. Chloe said, "[G]enerally for like academic papers you are usually arguing something, um, like you're trying to prove something to someone." Similarly, Josh and Jeff each said that the papers they wrote for college always involved "research to start." Lianna, Jeff, Josh, and Chloe each mentioned academic writing meant limited topics they could write about. Lianna was an Environmental Health major and was also enrolled in a CO150 course that wrote about environmental issues. She said she joined the group because of this. "I was like 'No! There's no variety,'" she said. "And [the writing group] came along and I was like, 'Oh, yay! Something I can write about that isn't green' [...] It was just variety. And I really wanted that." Jeff described a few of his different writing assignments in college, and said there was "nothing like, free – it's like an assignment." Josh expressed similar feelings about his own assignments, describing them as "nothing fun, nothing like, creative. It's just all for class." Chloe said her writing before the group was typically "All academic things [...] like academic writings and then analytical writings and that sort of thing. [...]. So it was never just like 'oh, here... write!'" In addition to the lack of choice regarding topics, a few of the writers also described academic writing by the rules and conventions they had learned. Scott said, "I guess I like to be really wordy and descriptive... I really love to just kind of develop a setting. And that's just not something... that's not relevant to most academic writing..." The specific stylistic requirements of academic writing were noted by Chloe as well. "You have to be much more like, grammatically correct when you're writing academic papers," she said with a shrug. A few of the writers felt that their motivations to write for school were outside of their selves, such as to please a teacher or receive a grade. When asked

why she saw school writing as different from her personal writing, Lianna said,

Well, you're graded for one thing. So you're pressured to do a good job. I guess it's kind of more like giving the teacher what they want to hear, [that] sort of thing. And I think that's the biggest difference with like academic writing and personal writing. Because there's [external] expectations.

Scott felt that he did not get very invested in his college writing because he did not spend much time with the pieces before he had to turn them in to the instructor. "[I]t's just completely detached academic writing," he said.

These comments convey apathy towards and detachment from the writing process that we should take very seriously. While composition pedagogy has made many efforts to appeal to students' interests in the classroom, these interviews reveal persistent feelings of detachment and frustration. This may be a result of what Ivanic discusses in her book, *Writing and Identity*. She writes that students may resist the conventions of academic discourse because "Writers position themselves by the stance they take towards privileged conventions" (93). In this sense, writers may exhibit non-conformist behavior or frustration with the limitations of conventions as they are negotiating their own values and those of the academic community.

According to Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, first-year students must begin college by seeing themselves as novices in order to acquire experience, and that "freshmen build authority not by writing *from* a position of expertise but by writing *into* expertise" (134, emphasis theirs). They say that accepting oneself as a novice enables experimentation and openness to writing instruction which results in expertise. While the intellectual benefits of acquiring academic discourse are not being contested here, I wonder if these writing group participants' description of academic writing reveals what Sommers and Saltz do not study: the feeling of detachment that persists *until* those writers can "write *from* expertise."

Examining the writers' descriptions of academic writing is important to understand how these students perceive the university's attitude towards writing. As they are acclimating to the university community, they are trying to sort out the values and attitudes the community holds toward activities – in this case, writing. In this way, the writing group participants are formulating the "generalized other" that Mead discussed. Although some of these students' perceptions of academic writing sound negative, their comments show the beginning stages of Mead's development of self as they recognize the values and attitudes of a community and begin reflecting on their own attitudes and values in relation to that community. There are some negative connotations to these writers' definitions of academic writing, however, that we should take into consideration. Is their "generalized other" of the academic community accurate? In other words, is there anything missing from the attitudes and values of our writing community? Perhaps composition studies would want students to recognize that both academic and personal writing are a part of our community and that we want students to have their own connection to the writing process and find motivation, enjoyment, and possibilities in college writing practices. The above comments from first-year writers illustrate a general feeling of detachment from the act of writing. Perhaps complementing formal instruction on the academic discourse with personal writing in an extracurricular writing group would influence students' perception of the "generalized other" (the college English community's attitudes and values). This could positively influence their idea of writing in college by providing them with multiple forms of writing in their first year of college.

Personal Writing

Judging by the comments above, first-year students' writing practices seem imbalanced in college. Students identify their writing practices as situated in the classroom and focused on the academic discourse. It is important to now examine how they describe their attitudes toward personal writing in the group. This can show whether incorporating personal writing into the first

year of college can complement perceptions of academic writing practices or if this kind of writing served additional functions for the writers.

In the interviews, a few of the writers identified personal writing as distinct because they wrote for themselves rather than for an instructor or grade. The participants' attitudes towards writing practices were different partially because of the separation from the classroom setting. Jeff described this as significant about the writing group, saying, "It's getting away from the whole classroom setting, how [the writing group is] just a bunch of people instead of you know, you got your teacher up there and the podium and you're sitting there and staring out blankly for an hour to an hour fifteen." He attributed some of his own writing confidence to this distinction, saying, "It's just nice to be able to express yourself and have somebody actually listen, instead of just read it and criticize it like a teacher does." Josh and Lianna also said the out-of-class context was one of the reasons the writing group allowed them to explore different writing practices with more authority and freedom. Scott's attitude was similarly influenced by the distinction between having an instructor in class and determining his own writing path. "It's just kind of a different approach...like [with] personal writing I start with just an idea and I take that in whatever direction I want, but academic writing already has the destination in mind and I have to...find a path to that destination," he said.

The writers also described personal writing as more open to their own experiences and interests. Scott said, "I've always been more of like a reflective writer; I like to look back on things and [...] use my own personal experiences to shape things." Chloe defined herself as a "very storyteller oriented person" who struggled with the switch from that interest in voice and storytelling to "very structured academic writing, you know, like '1, 2, 3 bullet points.'" Through personal writing, she found a way to integrate her enthusiasm for humorous storytelling with the act of writing.

Although these students' perceptions of writing in college are significant and directly related to the work on this thesis, they represent a small sample of only five individuals. However, Gregory Light, in an article entitled "From the Personal to the Public: Conceptions of Creative Writing in Higher Education," interviewed 40 creative writing students from undergraduate to graduate school about this very same topic. The students identified creative writing as "associated with the 'personal,' particularly personal or private experience. In this there appears to be a consistency of 'feeling'" and "most students...also perceived creative writing as providing them with more freedom" (264). Additionally, Light said that the students noted heightened "reader awareness" in creative writing and saw it as an opportunity to "tap into a much more private, personal and emotional reality for their ideas and material" (266, 265). Light's interviews revealed that personal writing was defined as distinct from expository or non-personal writing for classes, as personal writing is "characterised by freedom from the non-personal, external demands of facts and other people's ideas, comments and forms" (265). It seems that the writing group participants' views of academic writing and personal writing are representative of the feelings many students have toward writing in college.

I do not want to base all of this discussion solely on personal writing, as some of the prompts encouraged creative writing. Lianna expressed how much she enjoyed the variety of topics we wrote about in the group.

We did such different themes from like joking about the last person you think who would win the Nobel Peace Prize or like what do you think the afterlife would be...and how serious and how comical you can make that. So I think [the writing done in the group was] pretty experimental you know, trying on different things.

Chloe noted an appreciation for the mixture of writing prompts and the resulting freedom to write about her own experiences. "I think there were some [prompts] that were more fun and detached

and there were others that weren't. Some were very true, very honest sort of things that I was involved in, and just being able to connect to everyone else was fun."

These perceptions suggest that personal writing, specifically outside of the classroom, fosters important attitudes toward writing that solely engaging in academic writing does not. According to Anne Ruggles Gere, extracurricular writing groups tend to influence writers' motivation and sense of authority, which these participants' comments validate. Gere writes, "[I]ndividuals in self-sponsored writing groups possess an authority and autonomy unequalled by any [in-class] group" ("Writing Groups" 102). This authority is derived from the collaborative nature of extracurricular, non-hierarchical writing groups. According to Gere, "Individuals feel empowered because they discover new capacities within themselves as they collaborate" ("Writing Groups" 64). This provides a unique response to Ivanic's observation that many of her students learning academic discourse feel a "sense of *inferiority*, a lack of confidence in themselves" (88, emphasis hers). Also, having an opportunity to write about personal experiences is important during this phase of development. McAdams has noted that organizing experiences is seminal to forming and understanding one's life story or identity. He writes, "We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives" ("Stories" 11). Mead has also emphasized the importance of reflecting on experiences. He writes, "We have to recall the experience to become aware that we have been involved as selves, to produce the self-consciousness which is a constituent part of a large part of our experience" ("The Social Self" 376). Finally, having an introduction to varied writing practices in college may benefit the students' writing practices, according to Britton's theories. By coupling the expressive aspect of the writing group with the transactional function of academic writing, these students are engaging in mixed practices that can improve their writing skills (Britton et al.; G. Allen). While the interview questions were not geared toward exposing the influence of personal writing on academic writing,

the writers did note that they appreciated the mixed writing practices. Jeff said, "It's just good to have something different thrown at you once in awhile. Even if it was four or five weeks, it felt really good – a little break away from the normal." Chloe also recognized varied genres as refreshing, saying, "Just being able to kind of you know break away from the academic sort of papers... that was really nice. I enjoyed doing that, I thought it was helpful."

Impacts On Writing

In the interviews, the participants suggested that some of their individual approaches to writing had shifted and that they had defined their writer identity. Before analyzing the writers' reflections, I want to return to and elaborate on Mead's concepts of the generalized other and the emergence of the "new self."

According to Mead, students coming into college would try to understand the broad attitudes and values of the university community that they are joining. "The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community," Mead writes ("Self" 218). The individual learns of the attitudes of the community through interaction with people in that community. He considers himself from other peoples' perspectives (taking on their role) to see how he aligns with or contrasts the attitudes of the community. He also constructs the generalized other through taking on others' viewpoints towards various community activities. Mead explains that an individual cannot only take the attitudes of others towards him, but

He must also...take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged. He must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group itself as a whole, act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes the group's life. ("Self" 219)

Thus, the individual constructs the generalized other through perceiving himself and the community's activities through others' viewpoints. When the individual has generalized the community's attitudes, he then works through his own attitudes and arranges them to align with his community. Mead writes, "There is usually an organization of the whole self with reference to the community to which we belong and the situation in which we find ourselves" ("Self" 207). In this part of the development of the self, dissonance can occur as the individual negotiates previously held attitudes about certain activities in order to align his self with the new community's attitudes. Mead says that some attitudes or parts of the self may be relinquished as the individual no longer employs them in interaction as he organizes himself into a community ("Self" 208). Thus, a new self emerges as the individual is unified with his community. Mead explains, "[W]e find in moral reflection a conflict in which certain values find a spokesman in the old self or a dominant part of the old self, while other values answering to other tendencies and impulses arise in opposition and find other spokesmen to present their cases" ("The Social Self" 378). Therefore, according to Mead, "The growth of the self arises out of a partial disintegration—the appearance of the different interests in the forum of reflection, the reconstruction of the social world, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers to the new object" ("The Social Self" 379-380).

These concepts are important to revisit and explore as the remainder of this chapter will focus on how these first-year college students' reflections on the writing group and their transitions depict some of Mead's development of self. As the students generalize the college community, they are also trying to pick up on the attitudes the members of that community take toward various activities (such as writing). Additionally, the individuals are beginning to experience themselves from the views of others in the community and to grow more aware of their attitudes and beliefs. Some of these attitudes may differ from the community of the university, and so these first-year

students may be negotiating their “self” in order to better align with the community. According to McCartney, writing is an ideal way to apply Mead and explore the values of a community, experiment with different roles, and negotiate one's own attitudes (McCartney 125, 127).

The writers' upcoming comments relate to Mead as they discuss transitions in their individual writing practices and their recognition of writing identities. Additionally, the students talked about transitioning into college, the role writing played during that transition, and a greater awareness of self due to writing through the transitions.

Shifting Writing Practices

In the interviews, the writers' comments suggested that participation in the social writing group influenced their individual writing practices. Specifically, these comments suggest transitions in how much the individual wrote, how the individual felt about writing in both academic and personal genres, and what attitudes the individual held toward personal writing.

A few participants said they wrote more often as a result of the writing group. Jeff said the group was “an excuse to write for a few hours – you devoted your time to it” whereas on his own, he had not made the effort to write outside of class work. According to Jeff, he had the motivation and desire to write, but was not doing it regularly since he arrived at CSU. It was the writing group that provided the one thing that was missing in college – the place to write. “In that two hours writing [each week], I wrote...a *lot*,” he said. “Me and Josh don't [do a lot of writing on our own]. We just needed a place we could write.” Other participants noted that they wrote more as a result of their involvement in the group. Josh said he got more ideas and inspiration to write, and occasionally added more to the pieces he started during our sessions. “I definitely write more now,” he said. Similarly, Chloe said there were a few pieces she “kind of played around with afterwards” if she wasn't able to finish a thought during the group time. Additionally, in the interviews, the writers expressed positive attitudes toward the writing that went on in the group which differed from their

previous depictions of writing before the group. Scott and Jeff enjoyed the group and the kind of writing done because they felt it was a break from their routine. "It's just good to have something different thrown at you once in a while," Jeff said. Similarly, Scott said, "There are times that I just go about my day and I forget that there's like a world outside of campus." Finally, a few writers said they individually had more positive feelings toward writing personally. Scott said, "I really enjoyed it." Josh said that he engaged in personal writing of his own free will because "it was just fun." He admitted that he was "kind of embarrassed" about enjoying writing in college because he had a roommate and was not sure what his roommate would think of him. Once Josh joined the group, he said he began writing more, and felt surer of his desire to write on his own time. "[My roommate] writes now during class because of [seeing me writing around him]. So I guess now I'm more comfortable with [enjoying writing]." Chloe said having this style of writing mixed in was something she enjoyed as well. "It's just fun to write things creatively so I got some enjoyment out of doing it," she said.

The writing group seems to offer writing practices that are distinct from the students' writing practices in the classroom. By introducing them to varied forms of writing, they cultivated motivation to write more on their own time, which, according to Sommers and Saltz, is especially important during the first year of college. Their study focused on academic writing, but they found that individuals who wrote more during their first year of college tended to be more involved in writing throughout their college careers. Also, the writing group challenged the focus of these writers' idea of writing practices, as before the group they only saw writing in college as writing for classes. After the group, they had experienced mixed genres and they had cultivated positive feelings toward writing.

This is important as first-year students navigate the writing practices in college and the attitudes their peers have toward those writing practices. Looking at Josh's comment, it seems as if

the broader attitude toward extracurricular writing amongst students is that it is not enjoyable, and that people who do enjoy it should feel embarrassed. This illustrates Mead's discussion on the generalized other. Josh took the role of others in his community and saw his writing activities as not aligning with their attitudes, so he hesitated to engage in that activity. However, through participation in a sort of sub-community (the writing group) within the larger community (college), Josh found other peers who saw writing as enjoyable. As a result, he grew more confident and even influenced his roommate's view of extracurricular writing activities. Lianna and Scott both said they joined the writing group in hopes of meeting other first-year students who enjoyed writing. Perhaps needing to find others sharing that interest is a reflection of what Josh struggled with – viewing writing as enjoyable when most other college students' attitudes towards writing may have been negative. These alternative writing settings pose numerous benefits to these students as they cultivate confidence, positive attitudes toward writing, and motivation to write more often on their own.

Defining Writer Identity

During the interviews, the participants reflected on not only the type of writing they did, but also how that writing influenced their view of themselves. While working through the data collected from the interviews, I noticed the writers were identifying a couple different areas of personal transformations. One of these areas of transformation or increased awareness was in an explanation of a writer identity.

The writing group participants explained realizations they had come to about themselves as writers after participating in the group. Although they had engaged in writing before the group, reading their writing aloud, hearing other types of writing, and focusing on various topics for varied time periods helped them realize their writer selves. Their awareness of their own strengths, styles,

inspirations, and voices clarified their identities as writers. Scott and Lianna discussed this in the greatest depth.

Scott deemed himself “more of like a reflective writer” who had a passion for description and storytelling from his own personal experiences. According to him, his fascination with description sometimes made writing seem like a daunting task. “I like to sort of explore different settings, different scenes, and different feels, and like that’s my problem is I’ll write one scene and I never will really, like, sort of stand on it and really turn it into a story,” he said. He said that “it becomes like a process almost just to start [writing]” sometimes because of his interest in description and framing. Scott realized this about his identity as a writer because of the group’s focused writing times for each prompt and the way that challenged him. He said he appreciated writing for brief periods of time – he liked the “lack of commitment” and that it was “completely free.” He said he felt the short pieces he wrote in the group revealed different writing tendencies since, according to Scott, a shorter piece “reflects like the writer at that time.” Scott said that his approach to writing changed and became a bit easier as a result of the group. In part, this was because he learned to just *write*, and let the immediacy of freewriting have its “own merit.” Scott began to see simple experiences as topics to write about and starting writing was less daunting.

I kinda sorta turned that around and became a little more inwardly focused as a writer because of the writing group. I think I learned to appreciate more just like my day-to-day routine, [and learned] how to look at the aesthetic of my life as it is without being on a giant adventure or traveling around the world or like doing something. I don’t know, I just like to do these giant wild things so I’d have something to write about and write about that. But I realized...I don’t really have to do that to have something to write about.

Lianna articulated some of her own philosophies and values about writing during her interview. She defined herself as interested in fiction or historical fiction. She said, “I like writing

when it comes to having, like, some sort of basis or beginning to it, I guess, because I think there's a beginning for everything and that's kind of what I base my writing on." By historical, she meant using real experiences as starting points for fiction. She was fascinated with tracing stories back to their inspiration and referenced Lewis Carroll's friendship with a young girl which sparked *Alice in Wonderland*, J.M. Barrie's relationship with the Llewelyn Davies family which inspired *Peter Pan*, and Jane Austen's experiences which she crafted into *Pride and Prejudice*. Lianna's approach to writing reminds me of Guy Allen's realization in his teaching of personal essays: "[A]ll writing roots somehow in experience and observation" (254). Lianna explained that her writing began by going through her past and "putting that [past] into a creative perspective."

Like say you put yourself in a different character only it's in a different time – how would you be able to adapt? Or say *you're* put into a situation – how would you personally adapt? And ...really where you can start from....how would you take this situation...if you were *this* person how would you take *this* situation? Things like that.

Although Lianna said this was her philosophical approach to writing, she admitted she had not yet taken this approach to a complete project. She said that she had only just recently recognized and articulated this as her writer identity and value system because of her involvement in the writing group. "I think a lot of those, like, mini-philosophies really come out, like, because of this group. Like the whole historical thing, going back to the beginning...came from this. Or at least I realized it," she said. This comment shows how experimenting with writing can cultivate a writing voice and encourage recognition of oneself as a writer.

The other members of the group, Chloe, Jeff, and Josh, also identified various parts of their writing identities. Jeff realized he preferred to write at night, was most interested in poetry, and his inspiration to write was usually relationship troubles or societal issues. Chloe said, "I definitely didn't realize I was such a humorous sort of...light sort of writer until I started reading stuff out loud

and everything." Josh said he realized his writing tended to be more reflective, and that he was motivated to write by considering the paradoxes and conflicts he sees in society.

Sullivan shows that personal narrative writing, which encourages social collaboration and reflection, helps students become more conscious of how they construct a "self" (46). Joy Ritchie writes in her article, "Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity," that students' complex histories and writing identities can be beneficial for enriching writing but are sometimes confusing for the writer. She writes, "The personal, educational, and linguistic histories students bring to our classrooms contribute to the rich texture of possibilities for writing, thinking, and for negotiating personal identity. They also contribute to the confusion and anxiety many students experience" (157). Sullivan and Ritchie both highlight the significance of exploring personal experiences to negotiate and understand identity.

The participants' articulation of a writer identity also depicts significant transitions when viewed through Mead's lens. According to Mead, individuals have to take the role of others in a community in order to see themselves as an object, and seeing oneself as an object is pivotal to developing the "self." The writing group participants were able to see their writing identity as an object by sharing their writing and hearing it in conversation with other styles. Like Chloe stated, she realized her writing style after "reading stuff out loud" to a real audience. It is in the awareness of the self in relation to others that they were able to recognize the complexity of their individual writer identities.

Additionally, Lianna's comments about trying out her own lived experiences and personality in different characters and different situations represents an important part of Mead's theory. Mead emphasizes sampling different roles in order to contemplate potential actions or versions of the self before acting. The process of pausing to play out different actions before responding to a situation is what Mead calls "reflective intelligence" ("Self"). Robert McCartney

applies Mead's theory to writing, saying, "A 'role' is aptly coupled with 'playing' because there is much accommodation that must occur between the person and these social forms. We must try them on, play with them, as it were, to discover their implications" (121). McCartney states that writing offers a unique opportunity to try out roles on the page to reflect on and hypothesize about one's actions. He writes, "Although Mead does not mention writing, it would seem that writing above all other media allows and encourages occasions when reflective intelligence can operate...[Writers] can more freely compose alternative stances towards experience, [and] play with possibilities" (123). The writers were able to define their roles as writers through this experimentation and discussion with other writers, as Scott and Lianna showed above.

Finally, these first-year students' connected their selves to writing, which is important. As Mead says, an individual views himself as an object by taking the role of others *in the community he is trying to belong to*, and shapes his attitudes in a way that aligns with that community. These first-year students are generalizing "writers" as a community, and then situating themselves within that community by identifying their values and attitudes toward writing. This shows how first-year students' participation in a writing group gave them the confidence and comfort with writing to see themselves as part of the writing community. I believe this is extremely significant as these students will face numerous and varied writing assignments in college. If these participants have defined themselves as "writers" to some extent through an extracurricular writing group, they will likely approach other writing tasks with more confidence and enthusiasm. Graham writes that it is a great achievement "if [students] can begin to conceive of a variety of roles for themselves as writers" and if they can conceive of "how each role is connected to different aspects of their personal and social identities" (362). The writing group provides the setting where first-year students can try on different roles, negotiate their personal and social identities, and situate themselves in the writing community.

Self In Transition

Beyond identifying themselves as writers, the participants noted other areas of individual transformation during the interviews. They talked about how the transition to college was a rich time to be writing, how writing helped them work through change or confusion, and how putting their experiences on paper made them more aware of their selves. The writers' comments suggest that they do recognize this as a significant time of transition, and that the act of writing about their own experiences raises awareness of their transitions and invites reflection on identity.

First of all, the participants said writing during this particular time was significant in their eyes. Despite my own expectations, most of them did not feel that the transition was difficult but that it was simply a lot of change. Chloe identified some of those changes she had faced the first semester and related those changes to the writing and reflection she engaged in through the writing group.

I think everyone can get value out of writing about their experiences, but I think freshmen have a lot to write about because there's a lot of different things going on for them...the roommates, the moving out, not being under mom and dad's constant supervision...so there's a lot of things going on that they could write about. And also, transitionally, I remember the "moving in" [writing prompt about moving to college] we did. [...] I think it was helpful in just looking, sitting back and just kind of looking at it I guess and thinking about everything that you've gone through in the first couple weeks.

Josh also talked about the transition to college. Although he did not feel the transition was difficult, he did admit it seemed like he had changed a lot over the course of one semester and appreciated writing through those changes.

[The transition] wasn't really that hard. I mean since we were freshmen, it was like new for us, so I think writing about it kind of helped in a way...to understand what was going on,

and like the responsibilities that are like, kind of are at us now. So, I didn't think it was hard, and it was...it was kind of fun [to] kind of look back and see how you were – like "on move-in day," that one [prompt] – how weird you were back then, all those months ago (laughs).

Jeff also said that the transition was not difficult, but that during this first semester of college he started to recognize changes in him and his friends compared to high school – changes which he attributed to "growing up." "I have some of my friends [from home] to go out with [here at CSU] but we all grew up a lot since high school," he said. He noticed a change in their concerns and the maturity of their conversations when they all got together. Noticing these changes, he said writing during that transformation was helpful for him. "I don't know, it felt good to get it out [...] It's helping with that kind of transition to becoming an adult," he said.

These reflections illustrate what McAdams described as forming the personal myth, or developing an individual identity. These first-year students have started to orient themselves into an adult world and let go of their adolescent selves. During this time, they are reflecting on their experiences, organizing "the different parts of [themselves] and [their] lives into a purposeful and convincing whole," and revising their view of their identity (McAdams "Stories" 12, 95). Mead also emphasizes the importance of synthesizing experiences to draw a more conclusive, whole view of the "self." According to Mead, one has to revisit his experiences in order to be conscious of his involvement in those experiences ("Self" 200; "The Social Self" 376).

During a time of transition, conflict can emerge as one lets go of a previous phase and acclimates to a new phase of life. Mead talks about conflicting tendencies in the development of the self. According to him, "As a mere organization of habit the self is not self-conscious" but when "an essential problem appears" the self's discord is recognized. During this time, Mead says "different tendencies appear in reflective thought as different voices in conflict with each other. In a

sense the old self has disintegrated, and out of the moral process a new self arises" ("The Social Self" 378). As these students faced the "disintegration" of their high school selves and began to recognize a "new self" materializing in college, they used writing as a way to engage in "reflective thought." Baxter and Montgomery also discuss the conflicts of transitional periods of life in their theory of relational dialectics. They write, "Indeed, change and flux are represented most strongly in the transitions between life stages" and they mention adolescence as one of the prominent times of transition (36). The writers' comments above illustrate their awareness of some of these transitions between the old self and the new self during this time of flux. Chloe mentioned moving out and the absence of her parents' supervision, Jeff talked about his friendships maturing, and Josh alluded to facing more individual responsibility. According to Mead, it is during this time of disintegration of an old self and emergence of a new self that an individual needs to engage in reflective intelligence. McCartney argues that writing is an ideal way to apply Mead's theory and that the act of writing invites reflection.

The theory that conflicting tendencies bring about greater self awareness is supported by the writers' own assertions that they are motivated to write the most during conflicting or confusing times. Jeff said, "By the time I usually write about something it's when something's troubling me and I end up getting it out and explain it a whole lot better." Josh shared a similar insight in his interview, saying that much of his writing in high school was spurred by troubling experiences. "It was mostly just sad and depressing stuff that didn't make much sense. Just kind of me ranting and venting," he said. However, Josh and the other writers noted that writing through confusion and stress proved beneficial. "It kinda helped me clear my mind," he said. Looking more specifically at college, Josh said that writing through his first semester helped him feel better about the changes and see them more clearly.

Well I thought [the writing group at this time] was important to me because it helped me a lot...like it helped me clear my mind on Thursday nights and I don't know, sometimes I would just ramble on about how something was bothering me in the week and I would feel better about it afterwards. And so, I don't think it'll help everybody because not everybody likes to write, but for me it definitely did and if we could get more people like me, that it does help, into a writing group, then I think a lot of people will be better off for it. Because it...it definitely helps like, definitely helps avoid stress. For me at least. Just the way it cleared things out and...[I] get back to Josh.

Likewise, Jeff said that writing through trouble helped him see things clearer, especially relationship troubles. "It felt good to get it out [in writing]," he said. "I figured out my problem, so that's good." Lianna also saw times of transition as helpful periods to write through in order to understand and accept the transitions.

So I think [it's important] especially in the first year that you're at college or even the first year that you're at this college. And I think it's like when you write [a conflict] down it's easier to look at, you know? Because I mean it's right there on paper and it's easier to sort out your thoughts and things like that....If you're like, really confused about something, you're just like, you know, just write it out. Just get it out there. I mean you get it out there and then you reflect on it because when you're reflecting on something it's something that you have already thought of and that you've already done or said or...something. And so when you're reflecting on something is like "okay, well, you know...what if I did this instead of this" or "what if I said this instead of this" like "how would, you know, that play out" sort of thing.

As previously mentioned, various scholars have emphasized the importance of organizing experiences into a more cohesive "self." This is because of how fragmented a "self" can become in

varied roles and social groups. Mead says, "We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" ("Self" 207). Perhaps this is why it is so important for these students to write during times of confusion or transitions, as they are recognizing their varied and distinct roles (college student, son or daughter, high school friend, teenager, adult, etc.) and have a need to produce a stable representation of their selves.

Also, the writing group participants emphasized the benefits of writing to understand their selves, and part of that understanding was reached when they could *look* at it on paper (as Lianna said). As Mead has said, "The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly" ("Self" 202). Writing serves as a means to put one's own experiences and "self" they are trying to construct onto paper so as to look at it with different eyes, and see the "self" as an object. Additionally, writing has enabled the students to tweak and modify that "self" on paper as sometimes their writing was humorous, creative, or critical, as well as intimate and reflective. McCartney says that this is the significant aspect of applying Mead's theory to writing. He writes, "By taking on hypothetically different roles, one is better able to cope with problems of adjustment" (123). Additionally, Thomas Newkirk discusses how writing about personal experiences allows for this flexibility in self-presentation.

[T]he writer needs to present a malleable self, one that can be affected "significantly" by experience. The "self" is always at risk, in play, engaged in the process of growth and change. It can turn, even gyrate. To give it a name, this view is 'developmental'; the writer is engaged in a staged process of self-actualization. (22)

The writing group enables these first-year students to reflect on their transitions and produce a text that represents a part of their altering "self." As a result, they can play with the different aspects of their writing, they can see themselves as objects, and organize their various roles into a cohesive self.

During the interviews, the writers noted parts of their “self” that they grew more aware of as a result of writing and participating in the group. Jeff said that he had grown more aware of himself through separation from the familiarities of home and from reflecting through writing.

I've gotten in touch with myself a lot more up here because I'm with myself so much more.

[...] I like looking into myself a lot – parts that I usually don't...like my [response to the

prompt “write about thoughts you've had on a walk”] There's a lot about reflecting on

myself. It started out you know, kinda nonchalant. And uh, it got really serious really quick.

The walk Jeff wrote about was one he went on with his dad before moving to college. He said that during the walk they had “one of those father-son talks” and since he wrote about it, he has realized how much like his father he is. By participating in the group, Jeff said he also became more aware of his personality in a group. “That's what this [group] has helped me find out too, is that – how big, like out of our group, how big of a leader I was.” Scott also noted that he had come to some realizations that challenged his original views of himself and his experiences. He felt that he had separated himself as having more significant experiences than others until he really explored them and saw himself on the page and as a part of the group.

I think [the writing group] kind of puts some things in perspective – some of the stories I

wrote. Some of the things I guess seemed like a bigger deal until I put them down on

paper, then you can look at the whole thing...and kinda like brings it down to scale.

According to Scott, it was beneficial for him to realize this about himself and it helped him “check his ego.” He showed maturity as he looked over the stories he had written about adventures he had in high school, saying, “I had more of like an image of what I thought that whole thing was...and writing about it [I realized] it was really just a bunch of kids making trouble.” He then grinned and admitted, “But at that in and of itself is so cool.” Scott had not seen himself or his experiences from that perspective until he wrote them down and shared them in the group. Josh

also said that the kind of writing done in the group during his first semester of college made him more conscious of himself and his goals.

It makes finding yourself easier in college. Because like a lot of people still don't and they go through most of college without even knowing what they want to do, or anything about themselves really. [I prompt him to explain how the writing group made it "easier"]

I don't really know – because if you write about yourself, or about not even yourself...but seeing *what* you write kinda shows you what or how you are. [...] Like, from reading Jeff's things...even if Jeff didn't read it, or you didn't know Jeff, you can still see what kind of personality he is. Like when he wrote about the invincible bears and stuff. And Lianna like, most of her stuff was like old settings, you know, kinda back time period you can kinda see she's old fashioned and all that kind of stuff. But if you don't really write...or do anything to get to know yourself and then...I think you're kind of going through bad stuff to find yourself. [He references his roommate's severe drinking habits] and I feel kinda bad for them, 'cause like, I don't know, they seem to have no personality at all. So I think if you're a writer then writing kind of helps you identify yourself. So, I think that this group kind of did that for me.

From these writers' individual comments, it appears that reflecting on this transition and putting them on paper may enable them to see themselves as objects and grow in awareness of their selves. According to Gere, taking a more authoritative stance of writing brings about increased awareness. Gere writes, reflecting on individuals who participated in writing groups, "With the concept of authorship came a growing self-consciousness within writers" ("Writing Groups" 61). Jeff credits writing in the group with his recognition of similarities evolving between his character and his father's. Scott admitted that writing out his experiences and relating to others in the group allowed him to view himself differently. Josh makes a strong point when he says that he

thinks writing through the transition proved to be an "easier" way to find his self in comparison to drinking or other social pressures he has faced in college. This is a meaningful insight to show how a writing group can benefit first-year students. McAdams has shown that during psychosocial moratorium individuals are experimenting with a variety of lifestyles in an effort to define themselves. Essentially, Josh's comment shows that this experimentation can take place in a writer's notebook. By writing about the potential roles and lifestyles these students could try on in college to "find themselves," they are engaging in a safe form of psychosocial moratorium, writing, and engaging in Mead's "reflective intelligence."

Finally, a few of the writers interviewed acknowledged that they had grown more expressive or more comfortable sharing their thoughts with others. Lianna seemed to think that putting her thoughts and experiences on paper meant taking a part of herself and making it more public or visible.

I think its like, when you're writing or painting or doing any form of art or expression, whatever, then you're putting down something that is a part of you and its like that little you know, chunk of something – creativity or whatever you want to call it – is something, a part of you, that nobody else knows. Or, at least no one else knows as much as you.

In this way, these writers are taking a part of themselves that "nobody else" may know, and depicting it through some form of writing in a group. Jeff noted that learning to express himself was very important to him now, because according to him, "I have more emotions now than I have ever had." Using writing as a means to sort through and express those emotions was a way he personally benefitted from the group. "Knowing how to talk about stuff that is troubling you, even if you have to get down on paper first, it's better than not getting it out at all. I just," he said thoughtfully, "I just think it really helps you figure out who you are so the rest of the people can figure out who you are." Josh also stated that this was an area he grew individually. I learned, in a

way, I learned how to express myself more," he said. He stated that learning to express himself was more important than "just learning something" in a class. "Because like, it just kinda released all my stress and it made it easier to, like it made me a lot more open to a lot of different ideas and people," he said.

These comments highlight additional personal development but they also illustrate how the writing group provided a setting where the first-year students could engage in and share the reflections mentioned in the earlier paragraphs. The importance of having a setting where they could be vulnerable and share intimate, personal writing with others is something that will be discussed more in the next chapter where I focus on the social aspect.

The results of the interviews reveal a spectrum of rich and helpful insights from the perspective of first-year students. They have shared their attitudes on academic as well as personal writing, and have shown the importance of incorporating both into their writing practices during the first year of college. In regards to my research question of whether or not writing through a transition raises awareness of one's own identity, their comments suggest that it does. This alternative writing setting potentially raises awareness of a writer identity as well as one's individual identity as it goes through transitions. While composition curricula encourage students to bring their personal interests into the classroom, these comments illustrate a significant difference between connecting to writing and then using writing as a means to understand the self. Having a university-sponsored writing group for first-year students on campus to complement composition courses can help connect our students to writing in meaningful and personal ways.

Chapter 4

Writing Socially: “Let’s Share...Let’s Talk About Our Own Writing”

The argument in the last chapter focused on the importance of first-year students engaging in personal and creative writing in addition to academic writing. I now want to expand on that to argue that personal writing should take place in a social atmosphere, i.e., a writing group. I will briefly overview scholarship in our field that notes the significance of writing socially and then allow the writing group participants' interviews to illustrate the influence the social element had on their own writing and transition to college.

While composition studies may be familiar with the idea of writing groups, typically our scholarship situates them in the classroom as part of the revision and editing process. Recently, their value has been recognized in out-of-class contexts (Heller; Gere; Brooke et al.; Beckstead et al.; Cotich et al.; Park) and this scholarship calls for continued expansion in this area of composition studies. What writing groups have to contribute to the personal writing is the social element. This is the overarching similarity in all forms of writing groups and it is what makes them meaningful sites for identity exploration and personal writing. Anne Ruggles Gere's *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, highlights the social significance:

Perhaps the most significant commonality among writing groups appears in what they contribute to our understanding of what it means to write. Specifically, writing groups highlight the social dimension of writing. They provide tangible evidence that writing

involves human interaction as well as solitary inscription. Highlighting the social dimension enlarges our view of writing because composition studies has, until recently, conceptualized writing as a solo performance. (3)

In this way, writing groups challenge the assumption that writing is done in isolation – which is an assumption I used to hold myself. Walter Ong has explored the complexity of the separation of a writer from the audience in his piece, “The Writer’s Audience is Always Fiction.” He explains that typically writing is depicted as a solitary activity that “normally calls for some kind of withdrawal” (58). However, my research shows a variety of reasons why writers benefit from composing socially. In addition, my interviews revealed a plethora of reasons why the social element made the writing experience momentous.

To understand why social interaction is crucial to writing, it is important to note the complexities of the individual writer and the community, and the parallels that exist between these complexities. As I have previously discussed, the self is formed uniquely from perceiving and aligning oneself with a community which, during times of transition, can create dissonance and conflict in identity (McCartney; Mead; Baxter and Montgomery). Individuals may be trying on different roles and experimenting with life styles as they transition and define their role within their new community (McAdams; Mead). Therefore, writers can be negotiating multiple attitudes and roles as they also negotiate old and new communities and old and new selves. The first-year college student as a writer represents a unique blend of this multiplicity as he or she internally reflects on the attitudes of the college community while simultaneously acting and experimenting within that community. Thus, this transition is a complicated mixture of individual reflection and social interaction – which mirrors the act of writing.

Jeff Park, in his book, *Writers at the Edge*, says, "Writing is never a simple, isolated event; instead it is a highly complex social act" (20). Park elaborates on these complexities of writing between the self and society:

I suggest that expressive writing is the place where self and culture meet—a place that is both a zone of construction of the self, and a site of negotiation of meaning between the personal and the social. Writing is both an individual act and a social construction, influenced by membership within a number of discourse communities. It is within this diverse space that meaning is created. [...] In this space [of great diversity] the writer constructs a sense of self, and then negotiates relationships with others and the world through the creation of the written texts, which act as cultural artifacts. Writing in the expressive function is writing at the edge of self and the world. (8)

Therefore, according to Park, writing intertwines individuality and sociality. As a result, the multifaceted natures of society and of the self collide in the act of writing, which results in writing being a social *and* individual activity. This activity cannot be extracted from social forces because of the intricate relationship between the self and culture. Essentially, if the self is formed socially to some degree, the products of the self (writing) cannot exist separate from society.

The way I see it, a writing group embodies both the autonomous aspect of writing as well as the social aspect. A writing group incorporates individual reflection and writing in a semi-isolated way as the group separates to some degree during freewriting. However, that writing is immediately allowed to be put back into the social world and shared with an audience. In this way, a writing group mirrors the development of the self as it embodies the intertwined individual and collaborative aspects. During their interviews, the writing group participants emphasized the importance of the *group* aspect of the writing group as they wrote about their experiences and transitions. They highlighted a few critical reactions they had to writing socially. First of all, many of

them admitted they were apprehensive about sharing their writing at the beginning. However, they explained that the sense of community they developed in the group helped them overcome these fears. Thus, they were able to share their writing and felt that this was beneficial as it gave them new ideas to consider, affirmed their experiences, and positively influenced their writing. This chapter will highlight the first-year writers' reflections on the group to argue for the benefits of taking personal writing into the social atmosphere of a writing group.

From Private To Public: Trepidations And Rewards

Taking personal writing public can be intimidating at the beginning, as these first-year students' comments show. This section shows the writers' initial fear of taking personal writing public, the connections between members which made sharing writing easier, and then the positive outcomes of taking writing public. The positive outcomes that the writers identified include hearing differing ideas as well as having their experiences heard and affirmed by their peers.

Apprehension

One of the reasons writers typically default to keeping writing private is because of the fear that personal writing may be insignificant outside of the self. Pat Schneider says in *Writing Alone and with Others*, "The act of writing is self-exposing and makes us vulnerable" (19). However, it is fighting that fear and risking bringing personal writing into a social light that brings about a writer's growth (Gere; Heller; Schneider; Park).

When I talked to the writing group participants about sharing their writing with their peers, it became evident that taking their writing practices to a social level was both beneficial and frightening. A few of the writers said that before the group they had never really shared any of the personal writing they had done with others. Lianna was a writer who was more protective of her writing. When I asked Lianna if she normally shared her writing with other people, she said, "No. Not at all. Because then you get like... 'Oh, well, you should do this and you should do that' and I'm

like, 'No. You don't know the basis.'" Lianna's comment illustrates the fear that anyone outside the self will not understand the writing, and then could devalue it by critiquing it. Chloe also felt protective about her personal writing and was usually resistant to sharing it with others.

Whenever I did write things, I was very hesitant usually to let people read them. Because I don't know, I don't like people like mauling my baby. [She laughs.] Sorry that's the first image... So I don't know, it was a little nerve-racking for me to read it out loud to people I didn't really know that well. And it's different when I know someone and they kind of know me well enough... but it's just kind of totally random and you're like "Okay! Here... here's my story." I don't know, because people don't always like how other people write.

Based on Chloe and Lianna's responses, the fear of exposing personal writing is rooted in uncertainty that it will be misinterpreted or disliked by the audience. Chloe described her writing as her "baby" and Lianna defended her writing style as spurred from some kind of basis in her own experiences that others would not necessarily understand. These perceptions illustrate how close to the self personal writing is and the level of vulnerability an author feels sharing those pieces with others. Schneider discusses the fears writers face when sharing their work and she identifies a variety of fears that surface during this process, including the fear of facing truths within the self that one may not want to realize, or the fear of letting people know what you are really thinking. However, she notes that "fear is a friend of the writer" because what one is afraid of contemplating is likely to be very meaningful (4). As the previous chapter alludes, the first-year students discovered this for themselves as they grew comfortable in their community of writers and began to share their pieces.

Crafting Writing, Crafting Community

Sharing writing can be possible, even positive, when the setting is based on similarities, shared authority, and respect (Gere "Writing Groups"). The writing group participants noted a

variety of similarities amongst the group members that enabled them to offer up their writing. Scott recognized this when he reflected on the writing group. He was grateful for the opportunity to have "a set schedule...and [to] get to talk to people and share stories, and meet other people who like to write. Because it's...a lot of times it seems like freshmen who like to write are few and far between. And so it's kind of nice to meet other freshmen who also like to write." Scott saw that the writers shared this stage of life as well as a desire to write. These provided a foundation of understanding which built up an accepting and supportive environment. Jeff agreed, "Just the idea of being in the group is good because there's other people like us, you know, trying to write, get their feelings out on paper." These comments highlight two important things that are unique to writing groups. First, that sharing writing in a group is *meaningful* and the writers want to "talk to people and share stories." This illustrates how Mead's reflective intelligence, which is an individual's thought process, must be taken into the social realm. According to Mead, "In reflective intelligence one thinks to act, and to act solely so that this action remains a part of a social process" ("Self" 206). When we consider personal writing to be a way to work through reflective intelligence, we see how this personal writing must be taken to an audience. "One inevitably seeks an audience, has to pour himself out to somebody," Mead writes ("Self" 206). However, to pour out personal writing can be an intimidating thing, as Lianna and Chloe's comments show. This leads to the second thing that Jeff and Scott's comments illustrate – those similarities create a sense of community that encourages the writers to share. According to Gere, the welcoming environment the participants identified is attributable to the out-of-class setting and non-hierarchical atmosphere.

As the history of these organizations reveals, individuals usually begin with some natural affinity of occupation....of status...or of shared concerns... This affinity usually implies or leads to a mixture of friendship and good-will and respect among members. These shared positive feelings contribute to individuals' willingness to surrender their writing to the

scrutiny and criticism of group members. In surrendering their writing, group members simultaneously give and accept authority. ("Writing Groups" 50)

McCartney also writes about the importance of having shared characteristics in a group that will make personal writing public. "[W]ith Mead, [social cooperation] is the means by which the self is developed," he writes. Reflecting on his research of social self-development, McCartney continues, "accommodation cannot occur unless both writer and audience hold something in common—values, attitudes, knowledges, beliefs, language. Therefore, the writer needs to emphasize these elements" in order to find a "bridge of shared features" (120).

Through the foundation of similarities and the acceptance of differences, the writing groups "surrendered" their writing to each other. Lianna, who expressed being afraid of sharing her writing with others, admitted this changed once she participated in the writing group. I asked her what it was like when she started reading her pieces in our sessions. "It was new," she responded. "I think there were maybe two stories out of all the ones that we did that I didn't read out loud, which usually it's the other way around. So it was new." Chloe also said by participating in the group, she grew more comfortable with reading her work. Josh, who was rather shy at the beginning of the writing group, said that the community aspect helped him feel more confident about sharing. "It got to the point where we were all just kind of hanging out and writing, like it was so relaxed that I felt comfortable with it. So um, I don't know, [sharing writing] was just...it was a lot different than what I thought it would be, but it was a lot better than I thought it would be," he said.

Once that community had been built and the group members were able to share their pieces more freely, they noted positive outcomes of doing so. In the interviews, the writers described how making personal writing public invited new ideas, different perspectives, and enriched the meaning of their pieces.

Fresh Perspective

First, although the writers noted that the similarities amongst the members helped them share their writing, they expressed appreciation for the differences in the participants as well. Their comments illustrate how the varied perspectives challenged and enriched their writing experience.

Jeff compared this experience of writing socially with the experience he had in high school as a student in a creative writing class. He acknowledged the different cliques in high school that prevented people from feeling open, and saw college as a community where diverse views were more welcome. This positively influenced his willingness to share and be himself.

[The creative writing class] was fun. And this is like that, but it's a lot more open. Like in high school you're always worried about sounding like "I'm popular" and here it doesn't matter – you can just share whatever you want and people are accepting of that. [...] I don't know why it's a popularity contest in high school and it not here. There are too many people to keep track of everybody's names to know "that's the cool kid." You know, the jocks aren't the heads of the school anymore. You just, you don't see everybody every day so I think that helps. You see them just enough to get a relationship with, but not to form any bad feelings about 'em. So that's pretty cool. I think that's probably why it's not a popularity contest, which is nice.

These comments highlight the significance of having this group the first year of college. Also, this illustrates some of the maturation and changes these students are going through as they shake off high school attitudes and acclimate themselves to the broader college community. Additionally, Jeff explained that having only first-year students in the writing group was one of the reasons why he thought the experience was significant, but that the reactions to the transition were different. "It was interesting to see how we're all kinda the same with it, but in a different way," he said. "Like we all had like the highs and lows of [coming to college], you know, but it was just different highs and

lows...the things that we thought were really good and the things that we don't [like], [and seeing] how they compare to each other." Jeff's comment is important because it shows the necessary balance between understanding the transitions and experiencing them differently. The foundation of similar life changes provided a foundation of "affinity" so the diverse reactions to the writing were accepted and positive. From Mead's perspective, this affinity may be based on the similar process the participants were going through as they tried to generalize the attitudes of the university. Though the "generalized other" may be similar amongst the members, the reactions to that generalized other were varied because each of the writers may be negotiating different attitudes and behaviors of their old self in order to connect to the community. Additionally, Jeff's comment illustrates that the writing group participants were not hesitant to express their unique views. This addresses a criticism of writing groups, which states that they will become arenas of "mutual admiration" rather than of critical thinking and growth (Park). Jeff shows that this was not simply an arena for "mutual admiration" but a place where the writers could differ in opinion and explore contrary views.

Lianna also saw the benefit of the similarities amongst the group members, but identified an important balance between the similarities and distinct differences in her fellow writers.

I think that's another part of the whole social aspect is like if you're with people who also like writing you're going to have that mindset where you're like "okay, let's write about something," you know, all having that same interest you know, or having that one thing in common. I mean – us two [she motions toward me] versus Josh and Jeff it's like, two different genders, two different ways of thinking...but we all have that one thing where it's like, "we like to write." And what about? Doesn't matter. What form of writing? [Doesn't matter] whether it's poetry, fiction, non-fiction, da-da-da, but we all like to write so it's like, "Okay. Set time, let's write, nothing else is going to get in the way."

Lianna's reflection is especially significant for two reasons. Firstly, this comment addresses another concern that has been raised in regards to writing groups. Some fear that instead of cultivating collaborative authority, a writing group may enforce hegemony as writers may feel the need to conform to dominant values (Park). However, Lianna reflects on how she sees the social aspect bringing in difference – different genders, different writing styles, and different topic interests. She also recognizes that uniqueness and individuality is balanced with similarity and acceptance based on a shared desire to write because they enjoy it. That provides the "both/and" relationship between the two opposing forces of writing – individuality and collaboration – which is the goal of the writing group. Baxter and Montgomery discuss the importance of this "both/and" status, writing, "Connection with others is necessary in the construction of a person's identity as an autonomous individual, just as relational connection is predicated on the continuing existence of the parties' unique identities" (9). It is rare in a group of people to create a sense of community without encouraging conformity. The writing group enables this trade-off between autonomy and connection with the individuals constructing their own writing and then interacting with others about their unique piece. Park describes this with the writing group he facilitates, saying, "At the Writers' Group [...] though each writer seemingly works alone, the process is actually quite social. Writing is both an individual and a social act" (19-20). Thus, writing necessitates social connection as well as individuality – just as identity formation requires independence and connection. This is why a writing group's environment is so conducive for writing about the self.

Additionally, other writers said that the mixture of responses to their writing provided them with new ideas to consider. Josh said, "I'm more open towards a lot of things that I wrote about. And like a lot of things other people wrote about I didn't even think about, and then it influenced [me]." He said he enjoyed the group because "you meet more people, you share ideas." Lianna also saw these different views as beneficial to the group atmosphere. She liked listening to others

and gleaning "different ideas" and inspiration from the other members. "It's just fun, because I mean, yeah, we got distracted a lot [but] I think that was, you know, part of it," she said. "From those conversations or from those distractions you can think of new ideas [...] they're good distractions, they're like creative distractions." Jeff agreed, saying that he felt that the diverse ideas that came out of writing socially brought him more creativity than if he had written in isolation. "You know, it was – it feels really good to have those different ideas because if I write by myself it's just going to be the same idea over and over and over again." These writers asserted that the diversity as well as the tangential conversations brought about a level of comfort and acceptance that encouraged people to share their writing.

Seen And Heard: Affirmation Through Audience

As a result of sharing their writing, the participants said it was significant to have an audience to share their experiences with. This enabled the writers to feel a sense of belonging through their similar experiences but also gave them recognition for their unique experiences that defined them as individuals.

Jeff reflected on sharing his writing with a group of peers, saying, "It's just nice to be able to express yourself and have somebody actually listen. [...] It felt good to get it out." Like Mead said, eventually one is driven to "pour himself out" to somebody else. Jeff seems to recognize this, and although he wrote personally on his own time before the group started, he was motivated to join in order to have a community to share those pieces with. Scott, who was outgoing and willing to share like Jeff, said that this is why he joined the group – to have people listen to his experiences. He said, "I think [Jeff and I] were the ones that were like 'let's share...let's talk about our own writing and see how people react!'" Chloe also appreciated having that audience for her writing, and having responses to her writing. I asked her, "What did you get out of the writing group?" Her response was, "We always talked about what I wrote, so that was always helpful." Like

Jeff and Scott, Chloe identified the social element of the writing group (having people to listen to her experiences) as the key reason why the group was meaningful for her. While Jeff emphasized the listening role of the audience, Scott and Chloe valued the responses and reactions of the audience. Having an audience for personal writing enables meaning-making and validation of one's experiences.

Previously I mentioned the importance of balancing individuality and connection, and it is through sharing writing that these are negotiated. At times, the writers would respond to each other's writing with stories of their similar experiences, which conveyed an "I understand" message. Other times, the writers shared pieces about extraordinary experiences (usually traveling) that gave them the chance to set themselves apart as unique. The comments above suggest the importance of having that reception of their experiences in order to validate their individuality and establish their connections. The result was that the writers felt understood and recognized. Lianna reflected on her participation in the group, and said she valued the feeling that she was understood. She said she liked "...taking different ideas and seeing what kind of people are out there that actually like to write...But I think the meeting people thing is the biggest part of it." I asked her why she thought was important to have people to write with. "Well, there's a connection, I guess," she replied. "Because like, you write, you know, by yourself, but when you have other people to write with it's like 'oh they actually understand.'" Those foundational similarities provide the connection that the individuals could then branch off from to establish their uniqueness.

By taking personal writing beyond isolation, the audience can interpret meaning of a written piece as it applies to their lives, and the author can see the way her written piece carries meaning outside of her self. This was evident in the discussions the writing group members would have after each written piece, as they would often share experiences similar to those of the author or comment on the distinctness of an experience. For example, when a writer shared a piece about

high school cliques, many of the other writers talked about the cliques in their high school and how they were similar. When another writer talked about his study abroad experience, his group mates recognized the singularity of his experience and expressed admiration. The meaning that is ascribed to personal writing through the social context is one of the beneficial outcomes of writing groups. McAdams writes of the connections that result from sharing experiences, saying, "Stories told at a day's end create a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audience" ("Stories" 28). As a result, experiences link the self to the larger community. According to Henry Giroux, there is a greater need for "the conditions for students to speak so that their narratives can be affirmed and engaged along with the consistencies and contradictions that characterize such experiences" (Giroux 18).

This is what a writing group provides – a place not only for affirmation, but for connection to other experiences in a broader web of one's culture. In order to weave oneself into that web, those experiences have to be publicized to some extent. In regards to first-year college students, they are trying to weave their prior experiences into a whole new web of a whole new discourse community. Ivanic argues that these discourse communities are, of course, social, and inevitably construct the individuals who participate in those discourses. "Discourse communities are the 'social' element in the expression 'the social construction of identity': a person's identity is constructed by their membership of, their identification with, the values and practices of one or more communities," she writes (Ivanic 83). This means that first-year students' discourse communities include those discourses outside the university, and that the complex unification of these varied discourses creates students' identity. An extracurricular writing group allows incoming students to explore and use all of their varied discourses in college.

Based on the reflections of the participants, the resulting perception of the writing group shows a feeling of *support*. The participants expressed gratitude at finding others who were facing

the same changes they were facing, who wanted to write, and who wanted to talk about their writing. Being aware of others who like writing encourages these individuals to continue engaging in writing on their own. It gave the participants a feeling of being understood, of having their unique perspectives acknowledged, and of belonging to a social group. The result was a feeling of being supported – supported as they transition into college and supported as a writer.

The Social Impact: Writing Transitions

So far, I have illustrated that the social aspect of a writing group benefits the participants by providing them with the opportunity to overcome their fear of sharing their experiences by joining a supportive community of peers sharing similar interests with them. Also, sharing their writing gives the writers new ideas and a space to have their experiences validated. This ascribes more significant meaning to their experiences or writing by taking their experiences beyond the self. Furthermore, involvement in a writing group can influence how these individuals approach writing. There are many ways the social aspect of the writing group positively influenced the participants' writing. I wish to explore three writing benefits the interviews revealed – the rhetorical benefit of uniting the author with her audience, the feedback a writer receives from peers, and increased writing confidence.

Audience Awareness

Connecting writer and audience is difficult, and it is something that many writers struggle with. Ong writes about this being an issue for student writers as the speaker has an immediate audience but to a writer the audience may be "further away, in time or space or both" (57). Gere also discusses this in *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. She writes, "Awareness of and responsiveness to audience constitutes one of the writers' major problems" (66). From my own teaching experiences, I can agree that identifying and considering a specific audience is something most of my students struggle with. Either they want to write to "everyone" or they imagine their only

audience member is their instructor or they never stopped to consider their audience at all. As a result, I design a series of questions and activities to help them increase their awareness of this tricky dynamic of writing.

What Ong and Gere have described (and I have experienced) as a difficult aspect of writing, is uniquely addressed in the writing group. Gere says, "One of the benefits continually attributed to the collaboration of writing groups is that they bring writers and readers closer together, thereby providing writers a direct experience with audiences [...] Collaboration ameliorates alienation by reorienting writers toward their readers" ("Writing Groups" 66, 68). A writing group takes the gap in time and space that typically exists between writing a piece and the reception of the piece and brings a near immediate connection. Although a personal or creative piece may have multiple audiences, and the members of the writing group may not be the sole audience in an author's mind, they are naturally a part of the audience that will interact with the piece.

The writers noted this connection to their audience in several comments during their interviews. In some ways, they saw the connection with others as significant because it gave more meaning to their experiences (discussed above). They also mentioned how the reaction of their audience was helpful. Chloe said, "[I like to see] how I write and stuff and how people... get out of it what I meant to get out of it." Jeff also noted the importance of having the audience interact with a piece and saw potential for the group to give an audience to pieces that had been written outside of the group. "It'd be good to have another person's point of view on a lot of pieces – even if its not one you wrote there but just an old one that you're like 'I'm not sure how this is' you know, get some feedback," he said. Lianna said one of the benefits was that "you do get input" from the audience through their reactions or comments. Scott agreed, saying he loved to take his writing into the social sphere in order to gauge his audience.

I'm kind of writing to like put it out there, more, yeah...see how people...because it's interesting not even to like, see if they love it or hate it, but to see how they react and interact with it, what they gain from it, if they like it or are completely bored by it. [I want to get] their response.

Participating in the writing group helps writers conceptualize an audience while they are writing since the writers are aware that their audience can immediately respond to their piece.

This conceptualization of audience while engaging in writing is significant because it is a skill that could be transferrable to other writing (i.e. academic). As we teach in our college composition course at Colorado State University, the most effective academic argument is one that directly addresses the target audience's concerns and persuades successfully based on that audience. In addition, awareness of audience can benefit the writer as she increases awareness of herself in relation to her audience. McCartney connects Mead's theory of the self to the act of writing socially. McCartney writes, "Mead believes that a major purpose of discourse is the discovery of our selves, defining speech as 'significant' when it affects the speaker. By talking to others, we gauge the effect of our words by the other person's reaction, which in turn makes us aware of ourselves" (McCartney 119). This process is the result of taking personal writing into a social sphere. Personal writing affects others, and as a result, the writer is affected as she becomes more aware of how she presents her self to her audience. McCartney continues, "Mead believes that the other person enables us to think of ourselves as objects. This new perspective allows us to enter our experience as individuals" (119). So one benefit of social writing is that it brings about closeness with one's audience, which causes the writer to be more conscious of her desired impact and the strategies she will need to employ to achieve that effect. A second positive writing outcome is that a writer then gauges the reactions of her audience in her head, which makes her more aware of her self in relation to others. The increased awareness of audience is

one outcome the writers identified in their interviews, and it enables the next positive writing influence.

They Want More Feedback

Because the writers were united with their audience in the writing group, they had the opportunity to receive feedback on their pieces. The use of peer-editing, workshopping, collaborative writing, or writing centers in the university writing community already show how vital feedback is when teaching students the writing process. A writing group is one more way to encourage young writers to see their drafts as active, changeable, and improvable.

The writing group I facilitated was not, unfortunately, very critique-directed. Perhaps because the group only met for five weeks, or perhaps because we did not discuss extensively as a group the feedback aspect, the responses tended to be more *reactions* than suggestions for revision. The reactions were typically positive, such as pointing out a funny part, a unique play on words, or a neat idea for structure or content. The writing group members did view these reactions as helpful, primarily to get them more comfortable with sharing and to give them more confidence as a writer. However, without my prompting, during their interviews they showed eagerness for morphing those reactions into more critical feedback in the future. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants what suggestions they had for improving the writing group (as I continue to facilitate it in the spring, 2010 semester). Including more feedback was the most consistent, detailed, and enthusiastic suggestion for improvement of the group. Chloe expressed interest in giving feedback, saying that she particularly enjoyed focusing on the way something is written, rather than only the content. "Feedback would be great, I'd like to kind of look at peoples' work and analyze it and give stylistic feedback," she said. Scott suggested consistently revising a piece with the writing group to take advantage of the opportunity to get feedback throughout the entire process.

I think it'd be really cool if we...all focus on starting something and finding a piece we want to work on and sort of keeping that one piece throughout so we can come out of the ten weeks with one piece. I mean I might hate that like halfway through...but I think it'd be kind of cool to commit ten solid weeks toward one piece. Like maybe we could each write a short story by the end...like ten pages. I think that would be a lot of fun.

Jeff suggested bringing pieces written outside of the group to one of the meetings and getting responses on those as well. "It's good to get some feedback – especially if they don't have any idea what you're talking about, it's even better." These writers recognized the potential the group had for this aspect of their writing practices and wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to improve their writing. They were *eager* to revise, to put their writing out into a group to receive suggestions.

Perhaps they were able to make their personal writing vulnerable to criticisms because of the confidence they built up over the course of the writing group's meetings. Gere has written about this unique opportunity for writers to encounter feedback and criticism in a positive way. In part, this feedback is received well because the writers do not perceive their writing group pieces as final drafts and they collaboratively discuss the potential of a piece. "When the text is perceived as unfinished or indeterminate, the writing group provides a forum in which writers 'learn' how to make it more finished" ("Writing Groups" 75). She attributes the welcome reception of feedback to the setting – this feedback is emerging from a collaborative, equal setting where knowledge is co-created rather than distributed in a hierarchical or classroom setting.

Confident About Sharing Writing

Not only did the participants reference writing changes because of their connection with audience and the potential for feedback, they also cited writing socially as a positive influence on their confidence. As Gere stated earlier, because of the group's non-hierarchical organization, the group members were able to establish individual authority and confidence through the collaborative

facilitation of the group. The writing group participants came up with writing prompts, drove discussion in between writing, and responded to each other's pieces. As a result, their own investment in not only the group, but their own writing, increased. The result seemed to be a greater sense of confidence in sharing. Jeff said in his interview, "I like getting all the feedback like, 'that's so cool' – it feels good, it's an ego boost." Lianna, too, saw the writing group's responses to her writing as a "confidence builder." Perhaps this confidence is what drove the desire for more critical feedback on their writing. Scott acknowledged that because his confidence had increased, he was more eager to hear others' responses to his writing. "Maybe I'm not the best writer," he said, "but I'm confident enough that I want to see how other people interact with my work now."

I have touched on the idea of increased confidence earlier in this thesis, and those comments by the participants are relevant here as well. As stated earlier, Josh was insecure about writing in college because he was afraid of what his roommate would think of him. However, because of his involvement in the writing group, he grew more confident and even encouraged his roommate to start writing. Chloe, who was very unsure about sharing her writing, even acknowledged that it was a very positive experience. She was also the one who was the most enthusiastic about receiving more critical feedback in the future. The result of the writing group was a great deal of confidence about identifying writing as a *positive* interest. This reminds me of the earlier discussion of Mead's "generalized other" and how the attitudes of the community toward a certain social activity are the attitudes the individual takes on. Rather than seeing writing as limited to school work and boring or required, these first-year students enjoyed writing as a result of participating in the group and challenged those assumptions. These participants not only saw writing as positive, they began to define themselves as writers – writers who could use suggestions

and feedback to keep writing. The social aspect of the group – connecting to a community of writers – is the reason these first-year students saw writing as fun and a positive interest.

Progression Of The Group: From Uncertainty To “Comfortability”

The participants' observations and reflections on the writing group that have been woven into this chapter illustrate a variety of the aspects of social writing I have discussed. However, each of their comments I have included was placed as it related to a specific outcome I was focusing on, and I do not feel these comments represent their description of the growth in the group. I want to better illustrate the progression of the group from week one to week five from the eyes of the participants. Additionally, I want to put their comments into conversation with each other rather than categorize their reflections for analysis. I believe their explanation of their experience in the group – from first impressions to concluding thoughts – can best convey the importance of a writing group for first-year students. I think it is important to put this argument forth in the voices of the first-year students who experienced it. Therefore, I would like to overview additional comments the writing group participants mentioned in their interviews. These comments depict their perceptions of the progression of interaction that occurred as well as the importance of writing socially.

I asked the writers what their opinions were about sharing writing right when the group was getting started. Jeff expressed his own apprehension as well as his surprise at his friend Josh's openness to reading his writing. “I wasn't sure about it at first,” he said. “I'm surprised Josh shared so fast, he's very shy.” Josh acknowledged this as well, saying in his interview, “At the beginning of the group I probably would have been a hermit if it wasn't for Jeff because like, I was a really shy kid and I wouldn't share at all but if I have like one of my best friends there, then I am more outgoing with them.” As previously mentioned, both Lianna and Chloe felt that before the writing group they would rarely, if ever, share personal writing out of a sort of protectiveness and fear of what others would say about their pieces. Chloe said, “I've always been like, whenever I did write

things I was very hesitant usually to let people read them." Lianna had said, "[Sharing my writing] was new [...] I think there were maybe two stories out of all the ones that we did that I didn't read out loud, which usually it's the other way around." Scott saw himself as pretty open and confident about his writing, but acknowledged that even for him, sharing writing in the group excited and intimidated him.

I'm pretty open with my writing for the most part but some of the stories that I shared were a little bit more like...that's not something that I would maybe normally just tell people, I guess. So...it was kind of a range from being like, totally really willing to share with people and like excited to share because I can get feedback and like hear peoples' reactions to like being a little bit more reluctant to put that out there.

Many of the group members referenced the size of the group as highly influential for them growing comfortable and willing to share their writing. Consistently, about four people besides me showed up each week for the meetings. Josh said the size of the group certainly helped him overcome his shyness and start vocalizing his ideas and his writing more.

I think because of the size of the group and how it wasn't obnoxious, [like] thirty high schoolers, I think it was a lot easier to become more open about your writing and so, by the end of the semester like, I was fine in the sharing. [...] I think it was kinda easy because the group wasn't too big.

Lianna also felt the group size was very important, and felt that the small size and the resulting sense of friendship were the reasons people felt motivated to come each week.

And the group was small – I think that has a lot to do with [being confident sharing]. I think if it was a bigger group, I mean one, we wouldn't have time to read everything because we're so distracted and what not. I think keeping it small was really nice [...] I mean it was just like 'hey, come when you want' sort of thing, so there really wasn't any obligation. But

seeing the same people come back each week was really nice. You know, because there was that sense of obligation but it was like a...optional obligation, if that makes any sense at all.

Scott also recognized the smaller size of the group as positively connected to the focus on writing. "I'm kind of glad it's a tiny little group – it's more productive than like 20 people or even 10 people. Five is pretty ideal," he said.

Although the writers all had a little apprehension about sharing their writing, once they got together in this small group, they admitted they grew more confident and comfortable. Jeff attributed this to the way the group grew together from the first week, where they wrote about more superficial and humorous things, to the last few weeks when they were sharing more reflective, personal pieces. "I liked the more serious prompts a lot better. The first week, I liked that we kinda got everyone accustomed to the group and wrote about like animals or whatever," Jeff said. "That's what the first week was good for – like comfortability, get everyone acquainted. [And then] not like slowly escalate, but like more and more serious ones throughout. [We would] have, the first week, maybe just one serious [writing prompt], then like three. The last week we just threw them out [there]."

As a result, the participants were willing to share during the first week, and by the time their pieces shifted to more serious responses, that confidence was established. Lianna said, "[Sharing writing] was good practice for you know, building confidence." Jeff felt that he learned how to see merit in his writing and not be afraid of what other people thought. He did not keep his writing to himself just out of fear that others may not react the way he wanted. "But I'm always willing to share but uh, I've come to the part where I just don't care what other – not like I don't care what other people think, but I'm not going to hold it against them if they don't like my piece," he said. Scott said, "I felt like I was one of the ones that was more willing to share [my writing]." He

said this because he wanted to “see how people react.” He felt since he found his own style, it was easier for him to express himself, but that his confidence was still building. He acknowledged that he was *more* willing (after coming to the writing group) than he was before to allow others to interact with his writing. Chloe, as I elaborated on earlier in this chapter, was especially protective of her personal pieces. She had done the least amount of personal writing on her own before joining the group, and felt unsure about reading her pieces to the group. I asked her how she felt about sharing her writing in the end. “Yeah, no, it was not as bad at all. It was a lot more comfortable like the second time just reading out loud and stuff,” she said, smiling. Josh was probably the quietest member of our group the first couple weeks. Although he was willing to share at times, he seemed the most reluctant. While his friend Jeff was eager to read first and then talk about why he wrote what he wrote, or why he wrote it the way he did, Josh tended to wait awhile before offering to share, and then averted his gaze when someone responded to his pieces. By the end of the five weeks, Josh had really come out of his shell and was coming up with great and challenging writing prompts. The pieces he read in the last couple weeks were some of the deeper, more reflective pieces out of all the members over the whole five weeks. He said in his interview, “I think it was a lot easier to become more open about your writing and so, by the end of the semester like, I was fine in the sharing. Like, it didn’t bother me and it wasn’t really – I wasn’t really ashamed of my writing anymore.”

The ending result is that the writers felt this experience was significant, and they wanted the writing group to continue. Their concluding thoughts about their experience with the group are both heartwarming and persuasive. Jeff appreciated the encouraging and accepting atmosphere the group embodied. “Like, I noticed we never really said anything bad about any body’s work, the whole time,” he said. Lianna also stated that sharing in our group was a positive experience for her. “Well you do get input, but I think like it’s good to read it if like, you know, you’re in a group like *us*,”

she said. "I did like the social aspect of it because like I said before it's something I could look forward to, you know, and like...it was something to get me through biology the next day." Josh asked, "Are you still going to be here next year? I think...if I didn't have a writing group every week, then I think I'd kind of get stressed out more. And I don't want to say go crazy...but it would definitely be different if I didn't have like, two hours to just kinda hang out with people and vent and write." Scott summarized the experience saying, "I really enjoyed it...I think it was a good way to just sit down and write...and that's what's important to me. You don't really need to look into more than that, it was a time to sit and write." These first-year students' reflections make a strong and more personal argument for the significance of making space for an extracurricular personal writing group during the transition to college.

To review, writing socially is important during the first year of college because it emphasizes personal and creative writing at the same time students have academic writing emphasized in class. By meeting a variety of literacy practices and writing purposes during their first year, students are more likely to have a broader view of what shapes writing can take. Additionally, the benefits mentioned above may influence students during their first year of college and encourage them to continue writing on their own time throughout college and beyond (Sommers and Saltz). Writing socially also allows first-year students to find others who are interested in writing, just as they are. In the first year of college, a sense of belonging with a group of people with a similar interest can be very helpful. Many first-year students are trying a variety of things to fit into a niche and some of these things are not always fruitful (McAdams). A writing group cultivates a love for writing and unites it with a social event. Most of the participants admitted they checked out the writing group to meet other people who liked to write, because they felt like they were the only one who enjoyed writing creatively or personally. They formed relationships that, as Josh said, let them come out of five weeks feeling like a group of friends that just hung out

and talked about writing. These relationships are founded on the bond of a common interest in writing which was formed strongly because they were all open to making new friends, to trying out the writing group niche. They may not have been as willing to show up to a group alone or to invest in relationships with the other writers if they were in their second or third year of college, where they may have already found a niche. Writing socially during the first year of college is important not only for the group dynamic, but for each individual.

Chapter 5

Personal Reflections and Future Directions

To consider the outcomes of the group, I want to revisit the research questions I formed coming into this project. I had asked, "How might writing through the transition to college raise awareness of identity formation?" The third chapter explores the writers' perceptions on this question. Primarily, the students said they recognized the significance of their current experiences and noted various ways they were more conscious of themselves, their surroundings, their writing, or their transitions. I also asked, "What are the outcomes of experience-sharing in a writing group during the transition to college?" In the fourth chapter's discussion, the writers' interview comments about sharing writing in this extracurricular group suggested that they felt a sense of authority and collaboration, a sense of community with other first-year students, and a sense of belonging as individuals who enjoy writing. Finally, I also asked, "What are first-year students' perceptions of the outcomes of an extracurricular writing group?" That question is answered in multiple ways throughout both the third and fourth chapter, but the real answer comes from the aftermath of fall semester. Despite the five weeks being over, the individuals wanted more of the writing group. The writers wanted the group to continue communicating over the winter break and start back up in the spring semester, so it did. Over the holiday break, the writers shared a few writing prompt ideas and pieces they worked on while they were away from CSU via a Facebook group we created. In the spring, we started the group earlier in the semester (third week of classes) so it could run for 10 – 12 weeks (more than double the length of the fall semester group).

This semester, we meet weekly off-campus in a local coffeehouse, we keep a fairly small group, and we have never missed a week. The writers continue to share their writing regularly, but feedback has become a bit more important and some writers have brought back their pieces more than once. Additionally, people have begun to bring in writing they did in the past or in their spare time outside of the group. The group members suggested looking into publishing each other's work to keep, and we are currently in the process of putting together a small publication of some of the most memorable or favored pieces shared in the group. When I suggested that the group end a few weeks before finals week so they could focus on their studies, they actually asked that the group continue because, as Jeff said, "It'd be nice to have something like this during finals week." The writers' continued participation and contributions to the group suggest to me that the outcomes of that first semester were significant. And what the first-year students get out of that community of writers is portrayed in their eagerness and dedication for the continuation of the group. From my involvement in the group, my conversations at the end with each writer, and my continued facilitation of the group, I think that this group's outcomes are influential and positive. The group members enjoyed having a space outside of the classroom to write in this way, they enjoyed sharing writing, and they wanted to improve their pieces through feedback and revisions. More importantly, the group members invested in this community and appreciated the time to connect with others and reflect on their own experiences during this time. I feel that my questions were answered through the interviews and the continued life of the group.

Although I know this writing group was significant for these five individuals at CSU, I am left with some personal reflections and questions for our broader field to consider. Primarily, I want us to evaluate our current approaches to the elements of this thesis (first-year students' identity, writing groups, and personal writing) and look for the space for these groups. Additionally, I want us to consider how offering these groups could impact our students and our pedagogy.

First of all, I want to acknowledge the steps we have already taken in our classes to incorporate personal experience into the classroom. I looked through a few contemporary textbooks to see how we encourage personal reflection or personal writing in our composition classes. At CSU, the most common textbook used for CO150 is *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*. In this textbook, there are a variety of student-authored essays that exemplify particular research or writing skills that students read. After the essays, there are questions to consider or write about in response to the essays. In these questions at the very end of the chapter, students are invited to reflect on their own experiences that are relevant to the essay. Here are a couple of examples:

The essay students would be responding to in the question below is an essay exemplifying writing about a memory, written by Juli Bovard, entitled "The Red Chevy":

Psychological research has shown that people remember traumatic events more vividly and with more detail than other events. Has that been true in your experience? Recall two experiences—one happy, one traumatic—and consider whether your experiences support or do not support the research. (Reid 149)

In the question below, students are asked to respond to an argument written on standardized tests, written by Eric Boese and entitled "Standardized Tests: Shouldn't we be Helping Our Students."

In your journal, write three short paragraphs explaining your own experience with standardized tests. First, which tests have you taken, and when did you take them? Next, what was the purpose of the tests—to evaluate you or your school? Finally, describe the effect of these tests on your own education. Did they detract from the regular curriculum? Did they give you motivation and incentive to learn? Did they help you get into college? (Reid 599)

Establishing students' connections to a text through recounting similar experiences is a common way that writing courses have made room for the personal in the classroom.

I looked into other college textbooks to find additional ways our field has invited students' out-of-class lives into the classroom. In another textbook called *A Meeting of the Minds*, the following two tasks are given to students in order to begin their research process:

Write a narrative that describes your process of completing a research project you have conducted at some time in your life. Explain what made the project a success or failure.

[...]

Read through the editorial page of your local newspaper or campus newspaper. Are there any issues raised that you have experience with? Write a few paragraphs in which you explore your responses to the question. Based on your paragraphs, identify a question you would like to explore... (Callaghan and Dobyns 203, 274)

These two examples are not asking students to respond to an essay with personal experience but uniquely connect the students' extracurricular lives to their in-class research. In the first one, they recount their experiences with research in order to become more aware of their strengths and shortcomings in this process. The second task illustrates our field's attention to local issues and asks students to recognize and get more involved in their community's current issues.

Finally, I checked out *The Longman Handbook* which did not offer many connections to personal experience. However, this book did encourage freewriting and personal research to encourage writers to consider issues and narrow down on a topic. The book suggests,

'Talk' to yourself. In a journal, on a piece of paper, or on a screen, 'talk' to yourself about problems, controversies, trends, or ideas that concern you or influence the ways we live. . .

more important to these students)? How have we illustrated writing as a leisure or pleasurable activity? Rather than connecting our students to a single essay or argument topic, how have we made efforts to connect our students to the whole university community? Or to a community of writers?

I do acknowledge that we have started showing our students the importance of writing to learn in a variety of disciplines, rather than only in the humanities. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) has influenced curriculum development across the university. Here at CSU, we offer composition courses entitled "Writing in the Disciplines" with concentrations in the humanities, the sciences, education, and the social sciences. Students are recognizing that they are not only writing papers for composition or English classes, but for their whole academic career. This movement emphasizes the skills students learn in our courses and highlights their applicability in other fields. WAC also shows students that the writing process can help them understand a topic in-depth and challenges them to organize and illustrate that knowledge. However, WAC is limited to writing in different disciplines in the university.

I think WAC is showing our students how much we value writing, but this writing is still focused on the academic and it is still inside the classroom. Consider if we took WAC and transformed it to Writing Beyond the Classroom (WBC? Maybe it will catch on...). This could achieve some of the same concepts WAC has achieved. Instead of showing students our recognition of their individual discipline's writing styles, we are showing students our recognition of their individual experiences and personal writing. WAC has highlighted the value the university places on writing in all disciplines, and these writing groups could highlight the value the university places on the students. What are the potential outcomes of English Departments creating a space where students are given authority as writers and collaborative facilitators? What if they are given a space where their experiences are the focus, rather than used as supplements to academic

Interview friends, family, or co-workers. Ask them about questions and problems that concern them and inspire strong opinions. Keep a record of their responses and add your own ideas. . . (Anson and Schwegler 750, emphasis theirs)

This book strays from the narrative or personal response but still asks students to freewrite and look at their surroundings for issues connected to their interests and family/community.

These examples all illustrate our field's awareness of the significance of *connecting* our courses to our students' out-of-class lives. However, there is a limit to our interest in including students' personal experiences in the classroom. The writing tasks in our textbooks all have an agenda – to get students to care about their academic writing. These writing tasks are typically slipped into the end of the chapter and may be assigned as brief in-class writing or homework (if assigned at all). It is clear that the role of the personal in our classes is to aid the academic. In my opinion, this is understandable. And I would rather have subtle influences of expressivism and process theory integrated into our courses than the alternatives – ignoring the personal completely or focusing solely on the personal in the classroom. I think our field has recognized the complications with expressivism being a dominant pedagogy, and, rather than scrapping the whole theory, has made some intelligent and helpful compromises over the decades.

However, there is much more to personal writing than our classes are offering. Students recognize that recounting their research process and reflecting on a text's relationship to their own experiences are *not* the same as storytelling or personal writing. Their perception of the differences between personal and academic writing, as Chapter 3 showed, is drastic. We have grown more aware of the importance of our students' out-of-class lives, but have we only done this to improve their academic performance? How have we made efforts to encourage students, first-year students especially, to use writing outside of the classroom? How have we recognized and validated their out-of-class experiences that *do not* connect to our course curriculum (and are probably much

discourse? How could this influence these students' perceptions of their place in the university and their place as writers? As a result, how would students' attitudes toward writing practices potentially change?

Other changes are occurring when it comes to writing at the college level. The National Writing Project has expanded to over 200 universities and schools to provide professional development for more effective and varied writing pedagogy. This project includes approaches to teaching academic writing, personal writing, poetry, fiction, etc. Their efforts are focused on extending professional development to all instructors and thereby more opportunities to improve the learning and writing of all students ("National Writing Project"). While this project gives more attention to varied genres and values student experiences in writing, it is still geared toward training instructors for those writing improvements within the classroom. Another return to the personal is visible in the increased interest in creative nonfiction programs in colleges. Even here at CSU we have just established our own M.A. in creative nonfiction. This has been one of the fastest growing areas of creative writing since the late 1980s as scholars look across classic texts and timeless authors and see the undeniable use of the personal (Hesse). Also, as I mentioned earlier in the thesis, the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication had over a hundred scholars revisit personal writing.

The National Writing Project's utilization of personal writing, the growing interest in creative nonfiction, and the return to personal writing at our most recent conference suggest we recognize student experiences and nonacademic writing. However, each of these is still focused on the university setting and each of these also continues to enforce a classroom hierarchy where students are not given the collaborative authority the writing group offers. Finally, these give attention to the generalized student body without specific attention to first-year college students or their identity formation. To heed the calls of community literacy advocates while attending to our

growing recognition of the personal requires us to provide spaces beyond classroom walls for this kind of writing, empowerment, community, and self-awareness.

I know from my experiences writing alongside these first-year students that this group provided them with a sense of community at a transitional time when that is so important. I think if any of us think back to our own first year of college, we would remember how important it was to find people with similar interests. That is why we may have played intramural sports, started to hang out with people from our program, participated in campus events, or joined a church group – to meet people like us. These students shared an interest in writing and were given a space where they could explore that with others sharing the same passion.

I really want us to stop and think about it – these 18 and 19 year olds left their dorms on Thursday nights, walked across campus, and sat together writing about anything and everything for at least two hours a week...because they *wanted* to. They requested altering the group to have a greater emphasis on feedback and critiques so they could improve their writing over multiple drafts. They wanted this writing group to continue long after the five weeks finished. And it has...we have continued to meet weekly over the spring semester of 2010l. Additionally, each of the five participants in the writing group in the fall was taking CO150 but that class has ended...and they are *still* writing regularly because of the group. I also could not help but notice that Josh, Lianna, and Jeff were all “undeclared” majors before the group started, but by the end of the five-week group, all three of them had switched their concentration to writing-focused degrees (English Education and Journalism). I am not stating that the writing group directed their career choices, as each of these individuals were interested in writing before joining the writing group; yet the implications cannot be ignored, as the balance of personal and academic writing certainly kept the interest in personal writing alive and possibly influenced future goals.

We recognize the importance of making connections to our students' lives, and we realize the significance of writing to comprehend. What we have not done is move those realizations outside of the classroom and beyond the academic discourse. I believe there is much to be gained, both for the students and for our field, by making space via a university-sponsored extracurricular writing group.

I cannot end this thesis without commenting on my own thoughts about the writing group, as I have grown so personally invested in this project as well as in the individuals who comprised it. Although this thesis has focused on the first-year students' reflections on the group, I must confess I am the recipient of positive outcomes as well. I share these reflections to illustrate how we, as instructors and researchers, can also learn from this experience.

Over the five weeks, I went through a similar progression as these first-year writers. At the beginning of the group, I saw myself much like Lianna and Chloe saw themselves – anxious about sharing writing with others. Just as Chloe had termed her writing her “baby,” I had also protected my writing and feared the critiques of others. However, the first couple weeks of the writing group, I knew if I wanted these writers to feel comfortable reading their own work, I would have to set the bar. I would have to read my work. That intimidated me, but more importantly, it humbled me. I took Gere's advice to “value the amateur,” read my personal writing to these first-year students, and listened as they reacted to my pieces (“Kitchen Tables” 88). I was blessed with encouragement for my reflective pieces and laughter for my sardonic pieces. As a result, I gained confidence, too. Writing alongside our students shows them that we really value writing and regularly use it ourselves. This avoids the “do as I say, not as I do” issue. Additionally, writing with students can benefit us as we let students illustrate their knowledge of writing, give us suggestions, and maybe even improve our own writing practices with their fresh perspectives.

My participation in the group also provided me with a space for personal writing during a time that I normally would not have engaged in it. Although I was not facing the plethora and magnitude of change that these first-year students were, I was entrenched in a thesis that left me little time or energy to freewrite about things like past holiday memories, potential afterlives, or late-night phone calls. Those Thursday nights filled with laughter, some form of chocolate snack, and writing completely unrelated to my academic research were probably as cathartic and revitalizing for me as they were for the students (if not more so). I needed that “break from everyday life,” as Jeff put it, as much as they did. I probably would not have even cracked my black-and-white speckled notebook for several months if it weren’t for the writing group. I wonder how many other undergraduates, graduate students, or faculty let the kind of writing they do purely for *joy* slip off the map because they have no place designated for that, no supportive community of writers. And that is exactly what I gained from this experience – a community. Of course, my intentions with this group were to allow the participants to collaboratively form and enjoy the community aspects of writing groups, but by default, I enjoyed this as well. I do not see the individuals as “amateurs” or “freshmen” or “basic writers” or “students” so much as I see them as funny, gifted, insightful, dedicated writers and unique individuals. Friends, even. They kept me writing, and they made it fun.

In this way, the writers challenged my perceptions of students and my own pedagogical approaches. I can honestly say that participation in the group has benefited me as not only a writer, but as an instructor as well. By listening to their writing—where they scribble creative interpretations, portray their most prominent concerns, and react to college experiences—my own perception of first-year students has been complicated and enriched. My pedagogical approach to CO150 has improved as I am much more conscious of the insecurities and potential benefits that make up our in-class peer-revision workshops after sharing my own writing and receiving

feedback. My start-of-the-class casual conversations as well as my one-on-one conferences with the students have shifted slightly and I find myself asking more questions about how my students are doing beyond our class assignments. I make efforts to assess my students' attitudes toward writing and try to find ways to address the negative and cultivate the positive. I give them opportunities to use more varied forms in our course than I did before via more informal, in-class writing. All in all, I would say my own view of first-year students has been complicated by my experiences writing with them, as I was not innocent of generalizing or simplifying their writing skills and experiences, either. And by recognizing the individuality that comprises my classes, even in small ways, I feel I have become a better instructor. I honestly wish this sort of reflection and awareness of first-year students' experiences for all instructors. I also hope that every person who enjoys writing has the opportunity and space to join a community of writers to improve their writing and receive support. I am grateful for the way the writing group has impacted and continues to impact the participants (myself included) and hope to establish and maintain this kind of group wherever I teach.

My experiences have left me thinking that this is a new area of our field where a great deal of research could be done. For example, we could study the relationship between participation in a writing group and students' attitudes toward writing or whether simultaneously engaging in personal and academic writing improves student performance. We could consider whether writing groups make students feel more included in the academic community or if students with an interest in writing would consistently engage in personal writing during college without a writing group. We could research whether students in a writing group felt more adjusted to college compared to those who did not or whether students are more defined as writers as a result of participation in a group. These are just a few directions our research could go if we explore writing groups for our students.

More importantly than considering how these new directions can benefit our *own* research advancements, we could also simply consider the benefits for our students.

"I think everyone can get value out of writing about their experiences." – Chloe

"Because like, you write, you know, by yourself, but when you have other people to write with it's

like 'Oh, they actually understand.'" - Lianna

"I like looking into myself a lot – parts that I usually don't. [...] It's just growing up...it's helping with

that kind of transition to becoming an adult." - Jeff

"I think the writing group helped me realized there were people out there – that there are other

people out there who like to write that I'm not the only one." - Scott

"Seeing what you write kinda shows you what or how you are...But if you don't really write, or do anything to get to know yourself...then I think you're kind of going through bad stuff to find yourself.

[...] I think if you're a writer then writing kind of helps you identify yourself." - Josh

Appendix I

Interview Questions

The research conducted for this thesis went through the IRB H100 process. The following questions were submitted and approved for this study.

Opening Questions:

- How many of the five writing group meetings did you attend this semester?
- Why did you choose to join the writing group?

Main Questions:

- What did you take away from the writing group? What did you learn?
 - What did you learn about yourself from the writing group?
- How did participation in this writing group, specifically during your first year of college, impact you?
- How did you feel about writing about the transitions you're facing?
- What was it like sharing your experiences with the group?
- Tell me about the writing you do outside the workshop.
 - In what ways did the writing you did in the group differ from the other writing you do normally?
- How did your involvement in the writing group impact how you felt about being in college?

Final Questions:

- In what ways do you think the writing group could be improved?
- Would you like to review the materials used from this interview?

Appendix II

Erikson's Eight Stages of Development

1. Learning Basic Trust Versus Basic Mistrust (Hope)

Chronologically, this is the period of infancy through the first one or two years of life. The child, well - handled, nurtured, and loved, develops trust and security and a basic optimism. Badly handled, he becomes insecure and mistrustful.

2. Learning Autonomy Versus Shame (Will)

The second psychosocial crisis, Erikson believes, occurs during early childhood, probably between about 18 months or 2 years and 3½ to 4 years of age. The "well - parented" child emerges from this stage sure of himself, elated with his new found control, and proud rather than ashamed. Autonomy is not, however, entirely synonymous with assured self - possession, initiative, and independence but, at least for children in the early part of this psychosocial crisis, includes stormy self - will, tantrums, stubbornness, and negativism. For example, one sees may 2 year olds resolutely folding their arms to prevent their mothers from holding their hands as they cross the street. Also, the sound of "NO" rings through the house or the grocery store.

3. Learning Initiative Versus Guilt (Purpose)

Erikson believes that this third psychosocial crisis occurs during what he calls the "play age," or the later preschool years (from about 3½ to, in the United States culture, entry into formal school). During it, the healthily developing child learns: (1) to imagine, to broaden his skills through active play of all sorts, including fantasy (2) to cooperate with others (3) to lead as well as to follow. Immobilized by guilt, he is: (1) fearful (2) hangs on the fringes of groups (3) continues to depend unduly on adults and (4) is restricted both in the development of play skills and in imagination.

4. Industry Versus Inferiority (Competence)

Erikson believes that the fourth psychosocial crisis is handled, for better or worse, during what he calls the "school age," presumably up to and possibly including some of junior high school. Here the child learns to master the more formal skills of life: (1) relating with peers according to rules (2) progressing from free play to play that may be elaborately structured by rules and may demand formal teamwork, such as baseball and (3) mastering social studies, reading, arithmetic. Homework is a necessity, and the need for self-discipline increases yearly. The child who, because of his successive and successful resolutions of earlier psychosocial crisis, is trusting, autonomous, and full of initiative will learn easily enough to be industrious. However, the mistrusting child will doubt the future. The shame - and guilt-filled child will experience defeat and inferiority.

5. Learning Identity Versus Identity Diffusion (Fidelity)

During the fifth psychosocial crisis (adolescence, from about 13 or 14 to about 20) the child, now an adolescent, learns how to answer satisfactorily and happily the question of "Who am I?" But even the best - adjusted of adolescents experiences some role identity diffusion: most boys and

probably most girls experiment with minor delinquency; rebellion flourishes; self - doubts flood the youngster, and so on.

Erikson believes that during successful early adolescence, mature time perspective is developed; the young person acquires self-certainty as opposed to self-consciousness and self-doubt. He comes to experiment with different - usually constructive - roles rather than adopting a "negative identity" (such as delinquency). He actually anticipates achievement, and achieves, rather than being "paralyzed" by feelings of inferiority or by an inadequate time perspective. In later adolescence, clear sexual identity - manhood or womanhood - is established. The adolescent seeks leadership (someone to inspire him), and gradually develops a set of ideals (socially congruent and desirable, in the case of the successful adolescent). Erikson believes that, in our culture, adolescence affords a "psychosocial moratorium," particularly for middle - and upper-class American children. They do not yet have to "play for keeps," but can experiment, trying various roles, and thus hopefully find the one most suitable for them.

6. Learning Intimacy Versus Isolation (Love)

The successful young adult, for the first time, can experience true intimacy - the sort of intimacy that makes possible good marriage or a genuine and enduring friendship.

7. Learning Generativity Versus Self-Absorption (Care)

In adulthood, the psychosocial crisis demands generativity, both in the sense of marriage and parenthood, and in the sense of working productively and creatively.

8. Integrity Versus Despair (Wisdom)

If the other seven psychosocial crisis have been successfully resolved, the mature adult develops the peak of adjustment; integrity. He trusts, he is independent and dares the new. He works hard, has found a well - defined role in life, and has developed a self-concept with which he is happy. He can be intimate without strain, guilt, regret, or lack of realism; and he is proud of what he creates - his children, his work, or his hobbies. If one or more of the earlier psychosocial crises have not been resolved, he may view himself and his life with disgust and despair.

The above information is attained from the Child Development Institute, cited under "Stages of Social-Emotional Development..." on my references.

Appendix III

Writing Ideas from the Writing Group

Write about a walk you have gone on (thoughts you had if alone, conversation with a companion, etc.)

We listened to the song called "Little Boxes" (as sung by Regina Spektor) and then wrote a response to this question: If you were a box, what would you look like? What would you hold inside of you?

Consider the culture of your hometown or high school, and the culture of college. Write about the differences or similarities of these cultures.

Complete this sentence, trying to go beyond descriptions of your home: "I am from..."

Write about a fear you have.

Recall "one crazy weekend" or "one crazy day" and detail the events.

We took up David Eagleman's short stories of potential afterlives in his book, *Sum*, and wrote our own creative pieces of what an afterlife could be.

Write about the most unlikely person to receive the Pulitzer Peace Prize.

Write about a mini-philosophy you hold.

If you were an animal, what one would you be (and why)?

Write about a time you have experienced regret.

Consider where you were a year ago on a holiday.

Rather than considering the milestones in your life, consider the "inchstones" – what smaller routines and events shaped you?

What makes a man a man, and what makes a woman a woman? Consider the stereotypes and realities of these roles.

Write about a late-night phone call you have received.

Reflect on the day you moved to college and the progression of moving in and saying goodbye to your parents.

Write about a time you have experienced opposing or conflicting emotions simultaneously.

Write about thoughts you have had on a plane ride.

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